

**Aelred of Rievaulx: The Ganymede Saint**

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## **Abstract**

Aelred of Rievaulx is a lesser-known saint, and after nearly forty years on the calendar of the Episcopal Church there are still many who would not miss him if he disappeared. Underneath the silence lies a complicated man with a fascinating history, both medieval and modern, as well as some of the most hotly contested discourses in the modern Church. Where Aelred is known, he often becomes an ideological football, and it is only through examining the intersections of his social class, physical disability, and love for other men that St. Aelred emerges as a whole person. The “Ganymede Saint,” when rooted in his own context, defies simplistic narratives and challenges the Church to take another look at forgotten chapters of its own history.

## **Preface**

No one knows what to do with St. Aelred of Rievaulx.

Out of all the saints commemorated on the calendar of the Episcopal Church, he remains neglected and poorly understood by both the clergy and the laity. The conservative Church, uncomfortably aware of his popularity with LGBTQ Christians, chooses to ignore him or to decontextualize him as a "patron saint of friendship." The affirming Church, aware of his queerness but ignorant of the nuances of medieval sexuality, wishes to know him better but is often disturbed by what they find when they dig deeper into his life. Many of the clergy, who are educated in ministry but out of their depth in medieval history, would rather not talk about him even when approached by queer laypeople who are curious about one of their patrons. Many of St. Aelred's original devotees since his modern revival are no longer with us to pass along the significance of his theology as they understand it. Queer theologians prefer to focus on the positive spiritual potential of his love for other men while ignoring the complications of his material context. Compounding this situation is the diverse web of smear and erasure campaigns against John Boswell's scholarship in the field of medieval social history since his untimely death in 1994. Into this void have stepped ideological factions who wish to use St. Aelred's theology as a tool in demanding lifestyles of chaste celibacy from gay men and lesbians.

I don't remember when I first became aware of St. Aelred, but it was in the summer of 2023 that I devoted more time to exploring the lives of queer saints, both those saints that are celebrated primarily in a queer

context and the more traditional saints whose queerness has only recently been studied. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that St. Aelred was added to the Episcopal calendar at the urging of Integrity USA in 1985.<sup>1</sup> I was, additionally, intrigued to find that the Anglican Church in North America deliberately removed him from their calendar as part of their 2009 schism over matters of gender and sexuality, and he remains excluded from the calendar in their 2019 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>2</sup> This discovery led me on a deep dive into Aelred and his history, both medieval and modern. I approach Aelred, his life, and his spirituality not as a professional academic but as an amateur history enthusiast, a food service worker, and a lay minister of the Episcopal Church. I am uninterested in rehashing the theoretical debates over the extent to which sexual identities are “essential” or “socially constructed.” I will be treating John Boswell as the expert medieval historian that he was.

St. Aelred of Rievaulx cannot be understood as a whole person without a compassionate, intersectional, and materialist analysis of his class status, cultural background, physical disability, and marginalized sexuality. These intersections ultimately reveal the significance of his modern revival and his continuing relevance for the modern Church.

### **Aelred's Context**

Sources on Aelred usually begin with his professional and intellectual credentials. He was a Cistercian monk, abbot, historian, diplomat, and theologian. He served as an emissary to the Pope. He was a contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard of Bingen. He grew up in the court of King David I of Scotland, the son of Saint Margaret. He was part of a wave of zealous reformers that transformed the English Church following the Norman Conquest.

Ethelred, which was his baptismal name, was the son of Eliaf, the last in a long line of married priests. Clerical marriage was an older Celtic practice that came to an end following the importation of Roman church reforms after the regime change in 1066, and part of a general political, social, and economic upheaval that

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1 "A St. Aelred Catechism," *Walking with Integrity* (blog), entry posted January 12, 2011, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://walkingwithintegrity.blogspot.com/2011/01/st-aelred-catechism.html>.

2 *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments with Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Anglican Church in North America: Together with the New Coverdale Psalter* (Huntington, CA: Anglican Liturgy Press, 2019), [691].

transformed Europe during the High Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup> Northumbria was a unique country: "not really England nor was it Scotland," according to Brian Patrick McGuire, one of Aelred's modern biographers. By the time of Ethelred's birth in 1110, "[t]he Celtic fathers gave way to Roman demands. But the saints of the North remained as special reminders of a non-Roman inheritance."<sup>4</sup> The most important of these was St. Cuthbert, who came to rest in Durham, land of Ethelred's paternal ancestors. For centuries, these ancestors and others like them had been the working lifeblood of the Church in Britain and Ireland, pastoring the local flocks and tending the shrines of local saints.<sup>5</sup> They were deeply tied to the land, and much of their scriptural and pastoral wisdom was generational rather than academic. They were also quite cosmopolitan, hosting pilgrims and travelers from around northern Europe and navigating complicated feudal politics during a time of disruption and instability. Eliaf, seeing the writing on the wall, surrendered his ancestral duties to the Church and retired with a life interest rather than trying to resist these changes. His other two sons disappeared from the historical record, and his daughter became an anchoress. Aelred, writing later in life, was constrained by secular and ecclesiastical politics and referred to his father as a "sinner" for being a married priest, but stressed the care and devotion his father displayed to the local church and the veneration of local saints.<sup>6</sup> Aelred himself remained devoted to his ancestors, his saints, and his cultural heritage, and this devotion is perceptible in his leadership style and his theological writings.

Ethelred left home at the age of fourteen to work and continue his education in the court of King David I. At this time, he changed his name to Aelred in order to sound "more Norman," following the agendas and fashions of the aristocracy.<sup>7</sup> Walter Daniel, his posthumous biographer, described his role in a deliberately subtle and confusing way in order to give the impression that Aelred served as the King's seneschal, a highly sought-after political role.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this biography would be to convince the reading public that Aelred was a saint, and the reading public expected saints to have certain backgrounds. The reality, revealed in Aelred's own writing, was that he was educated in diplomacy and hospitality but was employed as some sort of table steward

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3 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), [207–10].

4 Brian Patrick McGuire, *Aelred of Rievaulx: Brother and Lover* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994), [11].

5 McGuire, *Aelred*, [24–5].

6 McGuire, *Aelred*, [22–3].

7 McGuire, *Aelred*, [1].

8 Douglass Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, by Aelred of Rievaulx (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1974), [6].

to the King.<sup>9</sup> This was a high-status professional role, but he was a servant in the household of a powerful feudal warlord and his knights. His duties involved food and drink, and therefore might be understood as a skilled customer service job. He would have played host to kings, queens, bishops, abbots, and foreign dignitaries, and would have worked with a high degree of sensitivity and precision in matters both practical and political. He would have managed other workers in the household, negotiated friendships and alliances, and competed with rivals. He would have knowledge of the royal court's interpersonal drama and was therefore privy to state secrets, with all the complications that implies. He would have been responsible for the quality and safety of the King's food and drink.<sup>10</sup> This was a position of immense trust and responsibility and could involve extremely high stakes. Bishop Robert Grosseteste, who lived just after Aelred's time, advised a countess that "no one should be kept in your household if you have not reasonable belief that he is faithful, discreet, painstaking, and honest, and of good manners."<sup>11</sup> If these were the requirements for the servant of a countess, they must be greatly multiplied for the servant of a king.

Even modern academic commentators often seem uncomfortable with the fact that Aelred was a member of the working class. Douglass Roby says, "[I]t is hardly necessary to see Aelred in the role of a cook-boy" and describes his writing style as that of "a young nobleman."<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, Aelred's class status brings him out of the comfortably black-and-white world of treaties and treatises and into the messy, carnal world of medieval social and economic history, and it is here that we are able to honestly understand him within his material context. "Up to the middle of [the nineteenth century] the chief interest of the historian and of the public alike lay in political and constitutional history, in political events, wars, dynasties, and in political institutions and their development. Substantially, therefore, history concerned itself with the ruling classes," wrote Eileen Power. She continues, "Not only great individuals, but people as a whole, unnamed and undistinguished masses of people, now sleeping in unknown graves, have also been concerned in the story."<sup>13</sup> Aelred had the good fortune to emerge from these unnamed and undistinguished masses. He was a highly educated and high-ranking servant

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9 McGuire, *Aelred*, [39–40].

10 Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Life in a Medieval Castle* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1979), [100–1].

11 Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval*, [108].

12 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [6–7].

13 Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (2004), [19], accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/13144/pg13144-images.html>.

by the time he left King David's court to become a monk, but it is likely that he would have indeed spent some time doing menial labor as a youth before taking on more prestigious duties and earning associated privileges. This would have been an excellent living for a young man of "low birth," and there is nothing shameful in this background. In his own writing, he acknowledged the misgivings that some of his noble-born monks may have had about his leadership: "What are you saying? 'What is he or who is he, that he is placed over us? He is an unlettered man with no schooling, a man who spends all day long concerned and devoted to worldly matters, a man neither outstanding for his eloquence, not trained in Scripture, not accomplished in his work, nor skilled in spiritual matters.'"<sup>14</sup> His education in Latin humanities was largely self-directed, and "Aelred learned not through logic or dialectic but by applying texts to his own life and situation. In him human experience was a point of departure for an interest in scholarly treatments of a subject."<sup>15</sup> The two most formative texts for him were Augustine's *Confessions* and Cicero's *De Amicitia*. Both of these texts, as well as his long years of pastoral experience and deep familiarity with the scriptures, form the foundation of his theology of *Spiritual Friendship*, for which he remains most famous to this day.

### **Aelred's Sexuality**

Ganymede, in Greek mythology, was a handsome youth carried away by Zeus to serve him as cup-bearer and passive sexual partner. *Ganymede*, in Aelred's day, was a slang term for a particular experience of gender and sexuality. Similar to modern terms like *twink* and *dyke*, this could be used in both affectionate and derogatory contexts, as both an in-group identification and an insult.<sup>16</sup> The archetypal (or perhaps stereotypical) Ganymede was young, beautiful, ideally blond-haired, and a passive homosexual. His company was desired by both men and women. A satirical poem aimed at a bishop who opposed clerical marriage accused him of being "Ganymedier than Ganymede."<sup>17</sup> The Church at this time had not yet fully adopted the idea that sodomy, or any sexual contact between men, constituted a distinct kind of especially serious sin. Scholars trace this innovation to the cleric Peter Damian, writing in the eleventh century,<sup>18</sup> and the centralization of power around European

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14 McGuire, *Aelred*, [102].

15 McGuire, *Aelred*, [42].

16 Boswell, *CSTH*, [253].

17 Boswell, *CSTH*, [217].

18 Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), [30–4].

monarchies beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>19</sup> Under these changing social, economic, and political conditions, people who expressed nonstandard gender and sexuality faced new and sustained persecution alongside other nonconformists, like Jews and Christian minorities, at the hands of both Church and State. The consequences of these changes remain with us to this day.

Queer people in the Middle Ages had a rich vocabulary of their own slang, much of which remains unknown to us, as only a sample will have been preserved in manuscripts of the period. Nevertheless, the existing literature gives us a peek into what it might have meant to be queer in the Middle Ages, especially the period between the tenth and twelfth centuries when writers produced a large body of queer poetry and polemic. The presence of such literature, and the existence of bishops who are "Ganymedier than Ganymede," should not lure us into believing that the medieval Church affirmed queer identities or that medieval society was a queer paradise. Many of the men and boys considered to be Ganymedes would have been sex workers, and many of them would have been introduced to the trade at painfully young ages.<sup>20</sup> The popular poem "Ganymede and Helen," which was meant to be performed in front of live audiences, is a dialogue about the relative merits of gay and straight love, with the mythological figures of Ganymede and Helen representing the interests of medieval sex workers, both male and female.<sup>21</sup> It is important, however, to view Ganymede as a rational actor and not a victimized object onto which we can project modern moral apologia in order to view our own time more favorably. Ganymede faced his share of unique difficulties and sorrows, but he was a distinctive part of medieval Western culture, and there were Ganymedes at all levels of society.

Aelred was a Ganymede. We don't know how he felt about this term, but it was widely used during his lifetime, and he would have been familiar with it. As a table steward to King David, he would have been closely associated with the classical figure of the cup-bearer, and a famous manuscript illustration made when he was about thirty even seems to depict him as youthful, pleasant, and blond (fig. 1). Unusually for a medieval person, it is also possible to verify a great deal of information about his sexuality, how he felt about it, how other people felt about it, and how it might have influenced his theology of Spiritual Friendship.

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19 Boswell, *CSTH*, [271].

20 Boswell, *CSTH*, [254–6].

21 Boswell, *CSTH*, [381–9].



Fig. 1. Aelred of Rievaulx ca. 1140 CE. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed 12 January 2024. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:De\\_Speculo\\_Caritatis.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:De_Speculo_Caritatis.jpeg).

Walter Daniel, writing shortly after Aelred's death in the twelfth century, originally attempted to employ standard formulae about Aelred as monk-like and chaste even before he took his vows, but his readers protested: Aelred had a reputation that remained infamous, and Walter was forced to admit that Aelred had been sexually active in his youth. Aelred himself, looking back from old age as he wrote *Spiritual Friendship*, seems to recall this time with considerable (if complicated) fondness. "The charm of my companions pleased me very much," he wrote, "and so, torn between conflicting loves and friendships, I was drawn now here, now there, and not knowing the law of true friendship, I was often deceived by its mere semblance."<sup>22</sup> In addition to the charms of love and friendship, in other writings he also offers a glimpse of the cruelty and exploitation he may have experienced at the hands of men in the King's court:

Recall now, as I said, my corruption at the time when a cloud of passion exhaled from the murky depths of my fleshly desires and youthful folly, without anyone being at hand to rescue me. The enticements of wicked men prevailed over me. They gave me the poison of self-indulgence to drink in the sweet cup of love. The combination of innocent affection and impure desire beguiled my inexperience. I slid down the precipice of vice and was engulfed in the whirlpool of debauchery.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Douglas Roby (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1974), [45].

<sup>23</sup> McGuire, *Aelred*, [50].



Possibly the most revealing detail about Aelred's sexual life comes through a turn of phrase used by Walter Daniel and pointed out by Brian Patrick McGuire: "He had to admit 'at this time Aelred sometimes deflowered his virginity.' Walter's expression is involuntarily humorous. In fact one can lose virginity only once, while Walter had Aelred deflowering his virginity 'several times.'"<sup>24</sup> With the benefit of more recent scholarship into medieval gender and sexuality, we learn that "the term 'virgin' was rarely used of men."<sup>25</sup> Virginity was associated primarily with a woman's premarital sexual purity, which was an economic commodity controlled and traded by men: the fathers who gave girls away to be wives, and the husbands who transformed them into married women.<sup>26</sup> The use of this language for Aelred, then, suggests that he was indeed the recipient of penetrative sex, which medieval writers viewed as "a preference for being a woman."<sup>27</sup> Modern gay people have a simple word for this: he was a bottom.

Aelred understood himself as a man, but because men in the Middle Ages were supposed to be penetrators rather than penetrated, his contemporaries would have seen his sexual preferences as shameful and deviant, and Aelred seems to have internalized this shame. As a young man, it would have been more acceptable for him to be a Ganymede for older or more dominant men, but this behavior would become more and more suspect as he progressed into his twenties: as a mature man, he would have been expected to start taking an active role rather than a passive one, and to perhaps start taking Ganymedes of his own if he preferred them to women.<sup>28</sup> Walter Daniel's description of Aelred's sexuality is not the only point toward this conclusion. The more significant evidence comes from an incident, also described by Walter Daniel, in which Aelred became the target of personal harassment by a knight of the king's court. This culminated in the knight publicly humiliating Aelred, in the presence of the whole court, with a crass (but unspecified) sexual slur which implied he was unworthy of the trust the king placed in him.<sup>29</sup> There were virtually only two ways to insult a man's sexuality during this time period. One was to suggest that his wife was unfaithful, and Aelred was unmarried. The other was to suggest that the man had been sexually submissive to another man. There is ample evidence from

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24 McGuire, *Aelred*, [50].

25 Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), [29].

26 John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), [169–70].

27 Karras, *Sexuality*, [129].

28 Karras, *Sexuality*, [139–44].

29 McGuire, *Aelred*, [48–9].

northern Europe to suggest that this would have been an extremely serious insult to Aelred in this situation.<sup>30</sup>

Walter Daniel, as Aelred's posthumous biographer, was primarily interested in presenting Aelred's character as holy and worthy of veneration, so he emphasizes Aelred's forgiveness of the knight and says that Aelred even won his friendship and loyalty.<sup>31</sup> However, the fact that Walter knew of this incident in the first place indicates that Aelred carried it with him through his years at Rievaulx Abbey, and likely hid a great deal of pain associated with this and possibly other episodes of degradation at court.

It was around this time that Aelred began to feel alienated from court life. The incident with the knight was probably not the only thing that contributed to his disillusionment, but it was certainly part of it. He experienced great professional success at the court of King David, but modern readers will recognize the signs of major depression in the way he describes his experience near the end of his tenure there:

Observing certain things about me, but ignorant of what was going on inside me, people kept saying: "O how well things are going for him! Yes, how well!" They had no idea that things were going badly for me there, where alone they could go well. Very deep within me was my wound, crucifying, terrifying and corrupting everything within me with an intolerable stench. Had you not quickly stretched out your hand to me, O Lord, unable to endure myself I might perhaps have resorted to the worst remedy of despair.<sup>32</sup>

Commentators are eager to point to the influence of Augustine on Aelred's thought processes in this passage, without pointing out what he actually seems to be saying. To put it frankly, he thought about killing himself. He associated his sexual life with his suffering, because, although the embrace of love pleased him, "I always feared being hurt and inevitable separation some day in the future. I pondered the joy at their beginning, I observed their progress, and I foresaw their end."<sup>33</sup> The transient nature of these relationships distressed him, and he perhaps feared a life of loneliness in a world where he could not find a permanent, egalitarian attachment to another person who treated him with respect. This desire for pure love and the desire for others to experience the same love provides the beating heart of his theology of Spiritual Friendship.

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30 Karras, *Sexuality*, [130–2].

31 McGuire, *Aelred*, [51].

32 McGuire, *Aelred*, [40].

33 McGuire, *Aelred*, [49].

## Aelred's Chastity

"Sex is trouble for everybody," said John Boswell, bluntly, to an audience of gay and lesbian academics and allies in 1986. With the authority of a career spent studying such things, he pointed out that "an astoundingly high percentage of human literature, from Greek plays to modern novels, is about the miseries of being a sexual human being."<sup>34</sup>

Eight hundred years earlier, the character of Helen gives an equally blunt voice to the concerns of the medieval Ganymede: "Tell me, youth, when youthful good looks change, when you grow a beard, when your face gets wrinkles, when your chest turns bushy, when your hole grows tough, what anxious stud will dream of you then?"<sup>35</sup>

If the specific details of Aelred's sexuality and enduring love for other men are difficult for the conservative Church to accept, the affirming Church finds it equally difficult to accept Aelred's chastity. It is extremely common in the modern world for LGBTQ Christians to face demands for chaste celibacy in order to fit the worldview of the straight majority, and so the fact that the Episcopal Church's first gay saint was a chaste monk can seem condescending at best. Queer activists and disability activists recognize the same impulse behind this expectation: the fascist desire for a "cure" of anyone who does not fit the dominant norm, using "whatever it takes for a greater race of humans."<sup>36</sup> As with all the other complicated details of Aelred's life, the answer lies not in taking either his sexuality or his chastity as a behavioral rubric for all queer Christians everywhere, but in exploring what his chastity meant to him in the context of his life and culture.

Modern commentators often characterize Aelred as struggling with his sexuality. Intentionally or otherwise, this depiction gives the impression of Aelred as a modern homosexual who believes his sexual desires to be sinful because the Bible or the Church said so, and has submitted to the expectation of chaste celibacy in order to renounce sin and align his lifestyle with the will of God. This presentism is inconsistent with the way that medieval people understood either sexuality or chastity. Ruth Mazo Karras states that "the fact that chastity

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34 John Boswell, "Jews, Gay People, and Bicycle Riders," lecture presented at Birge Hall, University of Madison-Wisconsin, April 25, 1986, video, 1:43:07, YouTube, posted October 10, 2012, accessed June 1, 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwEAZNdJ-J4&ab\\_channel=GeorgeL.MossePrograminHistory](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwEAZNdJ-J4&ab_channel=GeorgeL.MossePrograminHistory).

35 Boswell, *CSTH*, [386].

36 Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), [71].

is so remarkable in saints' lives would seem to indicate that it was not expected in normal people's behavior."<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, there were many medieval people from all walks of life who desired chastity for its own sake:

[T]he choice to abstain was a deliberate one. It often came as a result of what medieval people would have described as a vocation or call from God, and what modern people might consider an inner compulsion or an orientation. Often it required strong effort to overcome sexual temptation; the person who abstained from sex was nevertheless continually conscious of his or her sexual desires and the struggle to overcome them.<sup>38</sup>

Medieval chastity was both practical and spiritual, encompassing a complex understanding of sin, purity, health, love, eroticism, and "the miseries of being a sexual human being." There were also many people who desired chastity but were unable to practice it: married people, for example, who wished to be freed from the expectation of sex within marriage, but were bound to marriage and child-rearing by family and community obligations.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, chastity within a monastic context was often seen as a choice to direct one's erotic desires toward union with God, not carnal union with a partner.<sup>40</sup> Modern Protestants, with the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment, often find the idea of erotic union with God to be strange, off-putting, superstitious, or even sacrilegious. Medieval monks and nuns did not. They frequently used erotic language to discuss their spiritual attachment to the divine, but would vehemently deny that there was anything unchaste about finding a lover in God. They had, after all, subordinated their sexual desires to their vows of chastity, and found in God a greater lover than they would ever find in another fallen mortal.

Much of the medieval literature on the benefits and challenges of chastity was written with heterosexual men and women in mind, and what it might have meant for a Ganymede like Aelred must be constructed from context and inference. Aelred's sexuality was stigmatized in secular society not because he felt erotic desire for other men, but because he was sexually passive, which was seen as a deviation from appropriate gender norms in a world where masculine men dominated others, either sexually or on the battlefield. At the age of twenty-four, Aelred took his monastic vows, and especially his vow of chastity, as a way to set himself apart from his world of origin: "[v]oluntary marginalization is attractive in a world in which so many people involuntarily have had to learn to live on the 'far side' and isolate themselves because of family situation, sexual identity, ethnic

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37 Karras, *Sexuality*, [26].

38 Karras, *Sexuality*, [30].

39 Karras, *Sexuality*, [47–8].

40 Karras, *Sexuality*, [54–8, 155].

background, religious conviction, or political alienation."<sup>41</sup> This did not mean, however, that Aelred was distancing himself from manhood, or trying to escape his attraction to men. Instead, his transition to monastic life was an assertion of a different way of being a man: a masculinity that showed strength through denial, and feudal leadership through shrewd wisdom and flexibility instead of martial prowess.<sup>42</sup> Aelred understood his sexual desires to come from within himself, and he wrestled with them, as Jacob wrestled with the angel. He fasted, prayed, sang the Psalms, immersed himself in freezing-cold water, and even rubbed his skin with stinging nettles to subdue sexual arousal.<sup>43</sup> His trust in God and his intimate love for the person of Jesus sustained him through his first difficult years as a monk. As he wrote in a rule meant for an audience of anchoresses, "I had grown accustomed to filthy pleasures and he drew me to himself and led me on by the taste of inner sweetness. He struck off the unbreakable shackles of bad habit. He rescued me from the world and welcomed me with kindness."<sup>44</sup> Aelred maintained this regimen for the rest of his life, and was dissatisfied with his inability to fully extinguish his sexual desires. Modern LGBTQ Christians may recognize a kindred spirit in Aelred if they have been through so-called "conversion therapy" or have ever tried to "pray the gay away," but in Aelred's case, this was a freely chosen discipline through which he was able to flourish as a trusted leader in a world much more dangerous and violent than many of us can imagine. Aelred did not seek a cure that would make him fit in with the hypermasculine feudal culture he had left behind, but healing through God in a loving community, and a washing-away of the shame and depression that had become his companions in the court of King David.

The medieval understanding of chastity was not harmless. It provided the roots of modern purity culture, which is widely recognized to be harmful to men and boys as well as women and girls.<sup>45</sup> In its own time, the idealization of chastity led to conditions where people who practiced chastity, especially monks and nuns, viewed themselves as spiritually superior or more highly favored by God than those who did not practice chastity. The perception of unchastity in a woman's manner or appearance could be used to exonerate a man accused of sexually assaulting her. Female virginity, again, was of economic value to men, and chastity could be a way to reinforce patriarchal ownership of property, up to and including women's bodies. Many of these

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41 McGuire, *Aelred*, [147].

42 Karras, *Sexuality*, [42–3].

43 McGuire, *Aelred*, [59–61].

44 McGuire, *Aelred*, [62].

45 Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010), [167–83].

attitudes remain with us even in our supposedly enlightened modern age.<sup>46</sup> Aelred's extant writing shows some evidence of the negative side of medieval chastity, and also evidence of what we might call internalized homophobia. He refers to "that abominable sin which inflames a man with passion for a man or a woman for a woman," and laments "the loss of my chastity" compared to the virginity of his sister, who became an anchoress.<sup>47</sup> He even preached against "sodomites" among the secular clergy,<sup>48</sup> and he deplored the presence of kept boys in the houses of bishops and abbots.<sup>49</sup> Again, Aelred's attitude must be viewed in context and with compassion. He would not be the first or the last gay man to become critical of the excesses of the "scene," and he clearly experienced enough pain associated with his own sexuality to develop a negative attitude toward men who sexually dominated other men. He also certainly noticed the hypocrisy of clerics who preached chaste celibacy but kept sexual partners for themselves, especially when these clerics formed the governing body that had declared his own honorably married parents to be sinners and displaced his family from their ancestral shrines. We might also recognize a feeling of frustration with people who did not feel the need to discipline their sexuality when he put so much effort into maintaining the chastity that was so precious to him. It is difficult to unravel all of these feelings, and even more difficult to reconcile them in the words of our first official gay saint. Aelred, saint though he may be, was a human. Like the rest of us, he is entitled to his complex and conflicting feelings, and we should be able to take the bitter with the sweet.

Chaste celibacy, as Aelred practiced it, was remarkable in his own time and is only sustainable in a supportive community of people with similar goals.<sup>50</sup> It cannot be expected or demanded of any given person. It especially cannot be removed from its medieval context and transplanted onto a modern gay man or lesbian who desires the same basic human companionship that heterosexual people enjoy without a second thought. Chaste celibacy can only be freely chosen. For Aelred, his vow of chastity became a sacrament: an outward and visible sign of the grace he found through God, and a marker of the personal code for which he is venerated more than eight hundred years after his death: his integrity. He made a vow, and he zealously kept it. It was because of his integrity that he was trusted as the master of novice monks, and then abbot of a smaller monastery, before being

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46 Karras, *Sexuality*, [28–58, 150–7].

47 McGuire, *Aelred*, [30].

48 McGuire, *Aelred*, [101].

49 McGuire, *Aelred*, [83–4].

50 McGuire, *Aelred*, [129].

elected Abbot of Rievaulx.<sup>51</sup> If he had compromised his integrity and broken his vow of chastity, even though he was sometimes sorely tempted to do so, we would not have received his priceless wisdom about the formation and maintenance of long-term egalitarian love-bonds. He made a voluntary sacrifice of his sexual life in order to lead an intentional community in the midst of feudal warfare, to refine his understanding of love, and to pass along his insights through the generations that followed him. We are privileged now to live in a time when laypeople can study his life and theology in their own contexts, with the help of specialized historical scholarship into medieval gender and sexuality.

### **Aelred's Disability**

In all of the discourse surrounding Aelred's sexuality, there is little discussion of his physical disability. Different commentators have diagnosed him with a host of different illnesses, with most agreeing that he suffered from arthritis and kidney stones or gallstones.<sup>52</sup> The exact nature of his disability is not known, and it is also not known when he first became disabled. For about the last ten years of his life, beginning when he was in his forties, he lived in a purpose-built accessible dwelling and received permission from the General Chapter of the Cistercians to eat in the infirmary and be excused from prayer according to the demands of his health.<sup>53</sup> Having addressed what it meant to be gay in the Middle Ages, it is now time to explore what it meant to be disabled during the same time period.

There is no single model for how disabled people were viewed and treated in the Middle Ages. Like Ganymedes, disabled people existed at all levels of society, but different cultures and subcultures developed their own approaches and prejudices to different forms of disability. A comprehensive treatment of the disabled Middle Ages or disability within the Church is outside the scope of this study, and as with my treatment of sexual identities, I am less interested in theoretical models of identity construction than I am with material realities and their implications. As they did with sexuality, medieval people understood impairment within a religious framework that is both similar to and very different from the way modern people approach the same issues. For the most part, "those who could work did so, while those who could not work were supported by their

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51 McGuire, *Aelred*, [85].

52 McGuire, *Aelred*, [93]; Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [13].

53 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [12].

family, neighbours and their local communities. If they had no support, they had to rely on charity."<sup>54</sup> And, as was the case with religious minorities and people who expressed nonstandard gender and sexuality, sick and disabled people were increasingly subject to the mercies of Church institutions beginning in the later Middle Ages.<sup>55</sup> Blindness in particular was a religious construct, with blind people being excluded from the major spiritual experience of seeing the consecrated Host, which most late-medieval people took in lieu of giving confession in order to be able to consume the sacrament.<sup>56</sup> Thus, blind people became spiritually inferior to sighted people, comparable to the way chaste people believed themselves to be spiritually superior to people who did not practice chastity. As a result, the treatment of blind people in some medieval cultures became shockingly callous and cruel.<sup>57</sup> The possibility of a miraculous cure of disability became an important mechanism for reinforcing the Church's control of disabled people, and for reinforcing expectations of the proper performance of their disability. At the same time, the strict dichotomy between healing and curing did not yet exist, and many people understood "healing as restoring relationships and integrating someone back into social and religious systems."<sup>58</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that disabled people were monolithically marginalized in medieval society, and there were many disabled people who were simply supported by their communities. Edward Wheatley states that "we do not have detailed historical records of people with impairments who were integrated into their societies, because they lived lives too unexceptional to leave lasting textual evidence,"<sup>59</sup> but this is not correct. One of these people was Aelred of Rievaulx.

It is possible that Aelred's disability first emerged while he was still a young man working in the court of King David, and he may have wondered who would be there to care for him if he was unable to continue working. However, this is not verifiable, and neither Aelred's exact conditions nor their etiology are important to this discussion. Walter Daniel spent a great deal of time describing Aelred's suffering at the very end of his life, and "this attention is as it should be in terms of traditional hagiography, where the saint's encounter with death is

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54 "Disability in the Medieval Period 1050–1485," *Historic England*, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/1050-1485/>.

55 Edward Wheatley, "Crippling the Middle Ages, Medievalizing Disability Theory," in *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), [13].

56 Wheatley, "Crippling," [16].

57 Wheatley, "Crippling," [1–2].

58 Kenny, *My Body*, [9].

59 Wheatley, "Crippling," [8].



considered to be the most important part of his life."<sup>60</sup> The spirituality of suffering was important for medieval saints, as it remains important for many people today, but a historical focus on the spirituality of Aelred's suffering at the very end of his life obscures the reality that he was an active and effective leader through many years of pain and illness, and his community respected him as such.<sup>61</sup> Brian Patrick McGuire suggests that Aelred's ascetic practices may have contributed to his disability,<sup>62</sup> but this becomes problematic as it links his disability to theoretical concepts of sexuality, sin, and purification in ways that are not objectively verifiable. There is no need for commentators to "slot [Aelred] into their framework of understanding so there can be a tidy reason for [him] to be this way."<sup>63</sup> Aelred was not ashamed of his disability and did not seem to associate being disabled with being a sinner. He related to the weaknesses of others and helped them to be unafraid of their physicality, presenting "his own body as a source of comfort and reassurance to his monks."<sup>64</sup> Jocelin of Furness, writing about him after his death, described him as "a man of the highest integrity, of great practical wisdom, witty and eloquent, a pleasant companion, generous and discreet. And with all these qualities, he exceeded all his fellow prelates of the Church in his patience and tenderness. He was full of sympathy for the infirmities, both physical and moral, of others."<sup>65</sup> He also directly addressed other brothers who were impaired and unable to perform the work of the able-bodied monks, telling them "not to be sad or despair."<sup>66</sup> Rather than attaching moral lessons to disability, as some medieval churchmen did, Aelred encouraged adaptive mutuality and a social system in which "every community member, whatever his talents or limitations, participates in its wholeness and individuality."<sup>67</sup> This sensitivity is intimately tied to Aelred's experience as a disabled leader who understood that "we are all part of an interdependent web of connectivity, whether we care to admit it or not. It's just that some forms of interdependence are considered normative and others are considered tragic. Those of us who are disabled already know how to welcome interdependence as a habitual practice without demonizing our bodies in the process."<sup>68</sup> Aelred did not consider disability a barrier to the full inclusion of any monk who wished to live in

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60 McGuire, *Aelred*, [123].

61 McGuire, *Aelred*, [153].

62 McGuire, *Aelred*, [60].

63 Kenny, *My Body*, [52].

64 McGuire, *Aelred*, [152].

65 McGuire, *Aelred*, [131].

66 McGuire, *Aelred*, [97].

67 McGuire, *Aelred*, [97].

68 Kenny, *My Body*, [84].

his community. Nor did the people who knew him see Aelred's own disability as a barrier to effective leadership in matters both practical and spiritual.

According to Walter Daniel, Aelred did have some critics who questioned the "special treatment" he received for his illnesses, usually alongside the questions they posed about the wisdom of allowing monks to form particular friendships. Brian Patrick McGuire also expresses the opinion that Aelred "made use of his weakness and periods of immobility as a means in order to cultivate companionship in the monastery."<sup>69</sup> Ableism, like homophobia, is nothing new, even if it looks different now than it did in the Middle Ages. The roots of Western ableism are found in Aristotle, who "claimed that disabled people lacked reason and therefore were subhuman."<sup>70</sup> The ableist assumption at work in both Aelred's medieval critics and McGuire's assessment is that Aelred, as a disabled person, was somehow separate from his community and that the way he lived is open to comment by the able-bodied majority. He also performed his disability differently than his more famous contemporary Bernard of Clairvaux, who "resented the care he got and was a touchy patient"<sup>71</sup> in his old age and illness. Aelred and his closest disciples, meanwhile, seem to have accepted that he was a whole person with a disabled body. Rather than expecting him to perform disability in a way that privileged ableist expectations, his community supported his physical access needs and came to him for fellowship and wisdom when he was too sick to come to them. Modern society and the modern Church do not always meet these standards. Amy Kenny, in her call for the Church to enact disability justice, writes,

[P]eople think that they are doing something extra, something honorable, something praiseworthy when they treat us as human beings. Ask yourself, would you expect your nondisabled friend to be grateful to be included at church? Or for providing a place for them to pee? Demanding gratitude from disabled people for being included feels like pity. ... It sells people the lie that including disabled people is an honorable act of benevolence instead of a faithful act of loving your neighbor.<sup>72</sup>

Aelred was a disabled saint. Therefore, in order for his modern devotees to understand him, hagiographies of Aelred must center his disability instead of treating it as marginal to his leadership style, his queerness, or his theological work.

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69 McGuire, *Aelred*, [119].

70 Kenny, *My Body*, [25].

71 McGuire, *Aelred*, [119].

72 Kenny, *My Body*, [46].

## *Spiritual Friendship*

Aelred's theology of Spiritual Friendship, which he explored in a treatise of the same name, is often described in purely spiritual and intellectual terms. His profile on the English Heritage website, which also does not acknowledge his working-class background, describes it as "an ideal of friendship that people still find inspirational to this day."<sup>73</sup> The general impression is that Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship* is a cerebral, theological exploration of the nature of friendship that can be optionally read through a queer lens.

The spiritual and intellectual background of the treatise cannot be ignored, but its context shows it for what it actually is: a marriage manual for monks, in which Aelred acts as a pastor for men wishing to create and maintain long-term, egalitarian love-bonds with one another.<sup>74</sup> During Aelred's rule as abbot of Rievaulx, the population of the abbey doubled, boasting six hundred choir monks and lay brothers according to Walter Daniel's likely exaggerated account.<sup>75</sup> Aelred was famous for rarely turning a monk away, and for taking in monks that had trouble fitting in at other monasteries.<sup>76</sup> This created a stew of competing agendas, factions, emotions, and needs, and rather than forcing his monks to submit to harsh discipline or punishing them if they formed particular friendships,<sup>77</sup> Aelred insisted on the dignity of individuals and the ability of different persons to peacefully coexist within the expectations of community life.<sup>78</sup> He also insisted that close friendships were worth the difficulties that came with them, even when he was criticized by others who believed that "strong bonds of personal friendship and openness about interior life created jealousies and divisions."<sup>79</sup> Friendship for Aelred was not a distraction from spiritual matters, nor did it invite discord into the monastery. Friendship was the earthly mechanism through which Aelred encountered God, and he understood that "real intimacy is a sacred experience."<sup>80</sup> Aelred's "emphasis on the centrality of friendship in the monastic life places him outside the mainstream of the tradition. In writing a special treatise dedicated to friendship and indicating that he could not

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73 "History and Stories: Aelred of Rievaulx," English Heritage, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/rievaulx-abbey/history-and-stories/aelred-of-rievaulx/>.

74 McGuire, *Aelred*, [105–18].

75 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [10].

76 McGuire, *Aelred*, [95–6, 131–2].

77 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [13].

78 McGuire, *Aelred*, [102–4].

79 McGuire, *Aelred*, [122].

80 John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), [17].

live without friends, Aelred outdid all his monastic predecessors and had no immediate successors."<sup>81</sup> The Scriptures and the words of Augustine and Cicero form the bones of the manual, and Aelred's generational and personal experience with all types of human relationships forms its flesh and blood. The incarnational nature of *Spiritual Friendship* is what makes its messages so timeless and universally applicable.

True Spiritual Friendships, which transcend barriers and worldly concerns, are "relationships based on mutual dialogue, exchange, sharing and self-giving."<sup>82</sup> Aelred understood that lasting love placed expectations on each partner, and that true Spiritual Friendship would not be found in a large number of people. There might only be one or two Spiritual Friends in any given person's life. Aelred's understanding is rooted in "the Celtic tradition of the *anam chara* (literally, 'soul friend')"<sup>83</sup> and was further influenced by the classical Roman example of friendship found in Cicero. To classical writers, there was no such thing as "just friends" in contrast to the higher intimacy of a romantic relationship: "[n]o relationship was more emotional, more intimate, more intense than friendship. ... Friendship was also passionate and indissoluble, and much ancient literature idealizes intense, lifelong friendships involving great sacrifice on the part of one or both friends--motifs the modern world tends to associate almost exclusively with romantic love."<sup>84</sup>

John Boswell wrote that "there can be little question that Aelred was gay and that his erotic attraction to men was a dominant force in his life."<sup>85</sup> In the forty-plus years since Boswell published *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, both the Church and the Academy have spilled a great deal of ink trying to convince the reading public of all the ways that he might have been mistaken. In 1980, the study of medieval gender and sexuality was still in its infancy, and Boswell expected that others might be interested in finding out exactly what it meant to be "gay" in the twelfth century, so he provided in Aelred a point of departure for further historical research. The reason that Aelred stood out from other writers pondering the nature of love and friendship, or indeed from the writers who devoted their attention to seducing Ganymedes, was that Aelred:

...gave love between those of the same gender its most profound and lasting expression in a Christian context. ... Aelred developed a concept of Christian friendship which, in its emphasis on human

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81 McGuire, *Aelred*, [142].

82 Patricia Carroll, "Aelred of Rievaulx: On Spiritual Friendship," CatholicIreland.net, last modified November 1999, accessed June 1, 2024, <https://www.catholicireland.net/aelred-of-rievaulx-on-spiritual-friendship/>.

83 Carroll, "Aelred."

84 Boswell, *SSU*, [76–7].

85 Boswell, *CSTH*, [222].

affection, surpassed any earlier theological statements and explicitly expressed in prose much of the implicit correlation between human and spiritual love long characteristic of clerical love poetry. It was Aelred who specifically posited friendship and human love as the basis of monastic life as well as a means of approaching divine love, who developed and promulgated a systematic approach to the more difficult problems of intense friendships between monks.<sup>86</sup>

This understanding of love and friendship is in dialogue with and opposition to Aelred's sources. With Augustine in one hand and Cicero in the other, he wove in the examples of David and Jonathan and Jesus and St. John, tempering Augustine's negativity with optimism and Cicero's ruthlessness with charity.<sup>87</sup> Aelred's search for a greater understanding of interpersonal love, which was inspired by the joys and sorrows that accompanied his attraction to other men, was indeed a dominant force in his life, and its transmission to the present remains a testament to its importance. The straight Church, however, is hesitant to believe that the gay Church could have anything to teach them about relationships. In Aelred's time, intimate same-sex friendship was one of the only relationships that carried the expectation of equality in a world that was otherwise ruled by hierarchies.<sup>88</sup> Heterosexual marriage did not carry the expectation of equality, and it would be hundreds of years before married women organized to demand recognition of their individual rights within a marital relationship. Aelred's pre-chastity relationships with men also did not carry the expectation of equality, and it is likely that he experienced workplace sexual harassment in addition to the documented disrespect he received for his sexual preferences. This perspective probably shaped his quest for long-lasting egalitarian friendship and his desire to share his insights with others.

A somewhat common misuse of Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship* in the modern world is to interpret his distinction between "carnal" and "spiritual"<sup>89</sup> friendships as a dichotomy between sexual and nonsexual relationships, usually to present gays and lesbians with an alternative to active sexuality, which makes the straight majority uncomfortable. This is inconsistent with the way medieval people understood either sexuality or chastity. Aelred took his own chastity very seriously, but as the spiritual father of a huge community of mostly young men trying to find their way in the world, he would not have deluded himself into believing that all of their friendships were always going to be chaste. Chastity was an expectation, but so was sin, and medieval

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86 Boswell, *CSTH*, [222].

87 McGuire, *Aelred*, [105–7]; Roby 30)

88 Boswell, *SSU*, [79].

89 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, [58-59].

people understood the vast majority of sex acts to be sinful to one degree or another.<sup>90</sup> Very little of the counsel in *Spiritual Friendship* directly addresses chastity or sexuality. In other words, he "seems to have had not only confidence in his own ability to deal with the sexual component of his friendships, but to have trusted his monks to be able to do the same. Nor is there any evidence that Aelred's confidence was misplaced."<sup>91</sup> As a politically-active feudal leader, he had more important things to do than to police the individual sexualities of six hundred men. Presumably, if sexual issues came to his attention, he handled them on a case-by-case basis. Rather than dwelling on the dangers of sin, Aelred emphasized the virtue of interpersonal love and was realistic about the challenges that came with it. What this means for modern audiences is that Aelred's advice can be applied to a variety of relationship types, from marriages to business partnerships, as long as both partners have similar values and are dedicated to nurturing the relationship through good times and bad times. Patricia Carroll writes,

This ability to see beyond the superficial elements of someone's personality towards deeper levels would be one of the distinguishing features of this spiritual relationship. Another important factor for Aelred is confidentiality. For him there is nothing more wounding to friendship than the betrayal of one's secret counsels. Without this confidentiality we cannot take the risk of the self-disclosure and revelation which is so much a part of Aelred's idea of friendship.<sup>92</sup>

For Aelred, love was something to be taken very seriously, and he was prepared to go against the mainstream of his day to help others experience the love he found both in God and in his fellow man. Modern LGBTQ Christians will certainly find a kindred spirit in St. Aelred for this transgression of standard norms in the service of a higher call.

One of the most moving passages from *Spiritual Friendship* comes from Aelred's description of his own Spiritual Friend, who predeceased him and whose name has been lost to history. It is here that Aelred reveals how his Spiritual Friend was his partner in life and work as well as his caregiver in his disability:

He was, therefore, as it were, my hand, my eye, the staff of my old age. He was the refuge of my spirit, the sweet solace of my griefs, whose heart of love received me when fatigued from labors, whose counsel refreshed me when plunged in sadness and grief. He himself calmed me when distressed, he soothed me when angry. Whenever anything unpleasant occurred, I referred it to him, so that, shoulder to shoulder, I was able to bear more easily what I could not bear alone. What more is there, then, that I can say? Was it not a foretaste of blessedness thus to love and be loved; thus to help and thus to be helped; and in this way from the sweetness of fraternal charity to wing one's flight aloft to that more sublime

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90 Karras, *Sexuality*, [28].

91 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [22].

92 Carroll, "Aelred."

splendor of divine love, and by the ladder of charity now to mount to the embrace of Christ himself; and again to descend to the love of neighbor, there pleasantly to rest?<sup>93</sup>

Aelred ends the treatise with his firm belief that Spiritual Friendship comes from Christ and will persist in the world to come. Writing from the perspective of a person experiencing the apogee of friendship, he writes,

...[ascending] from that holy love with which he embraces a friend to that with which he embraces Christ, he will joyfully partake in abundance of the spiritual fruit of friendship, awaiting the fullness of all things in the life to come. Then, with the dispelling of all anxiety by reason of which we now fear and are solicitous for one another, with the removal of all adversity which it now behooves us to bear for one another, and, above all, with the destruction of the sting of death together with death itself, whose pangs now often trouble us and force us to grieve for one another, with salvation secured, we shall rejoice in the eternal possession of Supreme Goodness; and this friendship, to which here we admit but few, will be outpoured upon all and by all outpoured upon God, and God shall be all in all.<sup>94</sup>

This is, once again, outside of the mainstream medieval Christian belief that all human attachments will be swept away in the love of God, but for Aelred, there was no barrier between the love of a Spiritual Friend and the love of God. The two could coexist, and only the frailty of mortality keeps us from friendship with all people.

Aelred's *Spiritual Friendship* enjoyed wide popularity in western European monasteries for a few hundred years after his death, and it was even appreciated by literate laypeople.<sup>95</sup> However, its use declined beginning in the thirteenth century, and after the fourteenth century, signs of its influence disappeared from the historical record. This is when the Church developed "a distrust of the 'particular friendship' which at times borders on the neurotic. Friendships of any sort were banned from the cloister and the most ordinary of personal contacts were viewed with deep suspicion."<sup>96</sup> This correlates with the rise of intolerance against minorities, including "sodomites" in particular, in the later Middle Ages. The reasons for this shift are complex, involving church-state collaboration and "the rise of absolute government."<sup>97</sup> It remains relevant to the modern Church, and Aelred's modern history highlights the vexed relationships between church, state, gender and sexuality, love, belonging, individual and collective morality, and the responsibilities we have toward one another.

### **Aelred's Modern History**

By the twentieth century in the Anglophone West, affectionate relationships between unrelated men had been ghettoized into a dichotomy that Aelred would not have recognized: that of "just good platonic buddies"

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93 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, [129].

94 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, [131–2].

95 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [39].

96 Roby, introduction to *Spiritual Friendship*, [40].

97 Boswell, *CSTH*, [270].

versus "nasty deviant sex partners." Men who wished to have a deeper connection with their friends than was expected between "just good platonic buddies" risked being sorted into the "nasty deviant sex partners" category, which could carry serious social and legal repercussions, whether or not they actually wanted to have sex with other men. Men who were willing to defy this construct formed decentralized communities that eventually called themselves "gay." (Other people called them things like "homosexuals," "perverts," "faggots," and "queers.") These communities were never homogeneous, and always included lesbians, trans people, and others who expressed gender and sexuality in ways that were stigmatized in mainstream heteronormative culture. As has been discussed, this situation was one of the results of complicated political, cultural, and economic changes that began in the later Middle Ages and intensified through the modern period. It was not Christianity as a package deal that created this ghetto, but it was the teachings of early Christian ascetics like Augustine and John Chrysostom that "were eventually to provide the official justification for the oppression of gay people in many Christian states."<sup>98</sup> It is therefore the business and the responsibility of the Church to understand the cultural apocalypse where St. Aelred found his modern relevance.

Although he was never formally canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, Aelred has enjoyed continuous veneration locally and by the Cistercian order since his death and has been popular in small circles of gay Catholics since at least the 1970s.<sup>99</sup> Whether or not he would have understood himself in the same terms as a modern gay person, modern gay people recognize the orientation and strength of his feelings, and appreciate that he "legitimized the physical and spiritual embrace of other human beings. At the same time he believed it possible for this union to take place in the context of a flourishing and healthy community."<sup>100</sup> It was not until the publication of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* in 1980 that Aelred reached a wider audience, and interest in his life and work was "no longer limited to an elite group of dons or to a few isolated monastic scholars on the Continent."<sup>101</sup> Aelred had finally returned to the people who originally nurtured his remarkable life: the working class.

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98 Boswell, *CSTH*, [137].

99 McGuire, *Aelred*, [149].

100 McGuire, *Aelred*, [143].

101 McGuire, *Aelred*, [144].



The following year, the disease that would become known as HIV/AIDS was first described in medical literature, and soon everyone, including "those that had remained relatively shielded from or indifferent to the sexual revolution of the previous two decades,"<sup>102</sup> were forced to re-evaluate everything they had previously believed about human sexuality. The actions and reactions of Christians and Christian churches have been recorded and are available for study by any curious layperson. The global effects of the way this pandemic was mishandled in its early years are now readily apparent. And a new generation of LGBTQ people are now coming of age.

Fifteen years before he died of AIDS-related illness, John Boswell wrote,

In hostile societies [gay people] become invisible, a luxury afforded them by the essentially private nature of their variation from the norm, but one which greatly increases their isolation and drastically reduces their lobbying effectiveness. When good times return, there is no mechanism to encourage steps to prevent a recurrence of oppression: no gay grandparents who remember the pogroms, no gay exile literature to remind the living of the fate of the dead, no liturgical commemorations of times of crisis and suffering.<sup>103</sup>

A full history of twentieth-century gay and lesbian liberation movements is outside the scope of this study, but these communities formed the backbone of early HIV/AIDS activist organizations that fought back against the silence, stigma, and willful neglect that enabled the virus to spread unhindered in vulnerable populations.

Operating mostly outside of mainstream institutions, these activists worked within their own ethical frameworks to develop public health campaigns that did not stigmatize persons or identities and did not link the spread of the virus to Christian notions of sexual sin. Instead, they took a positive approach, encouraging "mutual care and widespread safer sex practices," which are "approaches that have succeeded in lowering rates of infection in gay communities."<sup>104</sup> Language about "morality" is often employed by religious conservatives as a counter to the perceived immorality of those who are not religious or conservative, but gay and lesbian AIDS activists asserted their own morality in the way they approached the disease, emphasizing "an alternative moral stance regarding sex that privileged the sexual freedom of the individual and the public responsibility of state and local government to make available information about safe sex and access to healthcare."<sup>105</sup> Although HIV/AIDS can affect anyone, gay men were some of the first and most severely affected by the disease, and gay and lesbian

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102 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [76].

103 Boswell, *CSTH*, [16–7].

104 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [89].

105 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [146].

communities were the ones that first rose to the challenge of responding to the epidemic. HIV/AIDS history and LGBTQ history are therefore inextricably intertwined.

HIV/AIDS history is also Church history. During the same era that gay and lesbian communities were caring for AIDS patients and developing sex education curricula, mainstream Christians and mainstream churches often proved themselves to be purveyors of shame and misinformation. It is not an exaggeration to say that mainstream American Christians, by and large, obstructed efforts by activists and public health workers to stop the spread of the disease and therefore contributed to the mass suffering and death of AIDS patients. Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist with an audience of millions, declared that "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals. It is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals."<sup>106</sup> Billy Graham, who was called "America's Pastor" and (unlike St. Aelred) is recognized as a saint by the Anglican Church in North America, publicly stated in 1993 that he believed AIDS to be "a judgment of God."<sup>107</sup> Prominent Catholics also stigmatized the gay community even as they insisted that AIDS was not a result of God's wrath, because "[such a] vicious idea overlooks the fact that people who are not gay, even children, get AIDS."<sup>108</sup> Calls for Christian charity did not soften the reality that this attitude created "a hierarchy of victimhood that placed innocent children above implicitly guilty homosexuals."<sup>109</sup> In 1984, a conservative Christian doctor penned an editorial in the *Southern Medical Journal* saying that homosexuality was "pathological" and that healthcare providers should "seek reversal treatment for their homosexual patients just as vigorously as they would for alcoholics or heavy cigarette smokers."<sup>110</sup> In 1988, the National Association of Evangelicals went as far as to discourage conferring "special 'civil rights' on persons afflicted with AIDS."<sup>111</sup> This encompassed not only their opposition to gay and lesbian rights, but also their opposition to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which protected people with HIV/AIDS from discrimination. Churches secured exemptions from ADA compliance on the grounds of "religious liberty."<sup>112</sup> At the highest level of the Catholic Church in the United States, the conference of bishops "rejected language about American pluralism" and attempted to reassert their absolute authority in matters of

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106 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [24].

107 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [1].

108 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [2].

109 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [2].

110 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [53–4].

111 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [43].

112 Kenny, *My Body*, [27–32].

sexual morality.<sup>113</sup> They explicitly tied the genesis of the disease to sexual immorality in general and homosexuality in particular, resisting harm-reduction efforts like clean needle exchange and condom distribution in favor of preaching chastity and monogamous heterosexual marriage.<sup>114</sup> Their 1989 statement "Called to Compassion" offered "an uncompromising moral position at odds with the current medical and scientific advice concerning prevention. The bishops offered moral truth, which they based on their authority as the church and reasoned through appeal to theological principles that seemed increasingly irrelevant for many Americans (and indeed for a good number of Catholics among them)."<sup>115</sup> In many of these instances, the Church's centuries-old assumption of cultural and political authority clashed with the material reality of a pluralistic society in which individuals could not be forced to adhere to any given moral framework. The result was a widespread reactionary backlash against nonconformist persons, groups, and modernity in general.

Of course, the narratives surrounding HIV/AIDS in its early years are not as simple as "ignorant conservative Christians" versus "enlightened liberal gays." Secular commentators, who often believe themselves to be ideologically decoupled from conservative Christian mores, also advanced the argument that the spread of AIDS was the logical consequence of gay men's sexual immorality. This often came in the form of lurid descriptions of niche sexual practices that did not actually contribute to the spread of the virus, even if they were shocking to conservative audiences.<sup>116</sup> Rhetoric that contributed to the scapegoating of the gay community also sometimes came from other gay AIDS activists like Randy Shilts, who created a moral fable about promiscuity on top of the figure of Gaëtan "Patient Zero" Dugas.<sup>117</sup> Even the medical community conflated AIDS with homosexuality despite the existence of literature showing that the disease was also present in other populations.<sup>118</sup> There was also a variety of responses from Christians. United States Surgeon General C. Everett Koop was a conservative Christian who disappointed his cohort by advocating for evidence-based sex education and condom use, saying, "I am the surgeon general of the heterosexuals and the homosexuals, of the young and the old, of the moral and the immoral."<sup>119</sup> Two Southern Baptists, Earl Shelp and Ronald Sunderland, created one

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113 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [129–30].

114 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [131–4].

115 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [135].

116 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [9–12].

117 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [10].

118 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [23].

119 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [53].

of the earliest Christian AIDS ministries and "denounced the claim that homosexual behavior caused the AIDS epidemic and called for comprehensive sex education to combat the spread of the disease."<sup>120</sup> They did this by appealing to Christian moral teachings regarding the preferential treatment of the poor, sick, and outcast instead of treating conventional sexual morality as the only form of Christian morality that was relevant to HIV/AIDS ministry.<sup>121</sup> The Metropolitan Community Church, which was the first church to organize itself around LGBTQ ministry, "has played an important role in the struggle for gay rights and in early AIDS activism."<sup>122</sup> Historically Black churches also formed ministries, which were some of the first to respond to HIV/AIDS as it appeared in racial minority communities.<sup>123</sup> Episcopal priests led masses for people with AIDS, Presbyterians passed resolutions condemning the threat of AIDS as an excuse for discrimination, and Catholic bishops in California joined interfaith coalitions in opposing Proposition 64, which "called for sweeping controls on people diagnosed with AIDS, even raising the possibility of quarantine, and threatened the confidentiality of people tested for HIV."<sup>124</sup> Members of Dignity, the Catholic LGBTQ advocacy group, were on the ground with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power to protest the conservative Bishop John O'Connor's refusal to disseminate safer sex information and promote condom use.<sup>125</sup> Terry McGovern, a layperson, wrote, "Cardinal O'Connor is not simply worshipping his God. He is preaching the politics of our genocide from that pulpit. We cannot be fooled by mainstream outrage—we are fighting for our lives."<sup>126</sup> At the same time, many liberal religious leaders like the Episcopal bishop of New York privileged the tranquility of the institution over the content of the protest and called it a "singularly unacceptable extension of civil disobedience."<sup>127</sup> Many others, both religious and secular, gay and straight, recognized that the conservative status quo, even when it preaches compassion toward sinners, "helps to create the unfair and abusive treatment received by gay AIDS patients."<sup>128</sup> There is no single easy narrative about religion and AIDS, or even about Christianity and AIDS, in the United States. What seems clear in hindsight was not always clear in the moment, and every group contained multiple perspectives. However, it

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120 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [40].

121 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [38–42].

122 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [34].

123 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [36].

124 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [37–8].

125 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [137–85].

126 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [176].

127 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [164].

128 Petro, *After the Wrath*, [178].

is verifiable that the mainstream Christian position contributed to the stigmatization and marginalization of people with HIV/AIDS. It is also verifiable that gay and lesbian activists and caregivers were at the forefront of trying to stop the disease in its tracks. The Church is therefore the student of the LGBTQ community where HIV/AIDS is concerned.

Amid the sorrow and suffering of AIDS patients, the courage and compassion of their caregivers, and the righteous outrage of AIDS activists, a quiet gesture went largely unnoticed by mainstream commentators. At the 1985 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, and following the suggestion of members of Integrity USA, "the Standing Liturgical Commission recommended Aelred, along with a number of others, for inclusion in Lesser Feasts and Fasts."<sup>129</sup> The House of Bishops, with full awareness that John Boswell had characterized Aelred as a gay man, approved his addition to the calendar of saints. Two years later, Integrity USA officially canonized St. Aelred of Rievaulx as their patron, promising "to regularly observe his feast, promote his veneration and seek before the heavenly throne of grace the support of his prayers on behalf of justice and acceptance for lesbians and gay men."<sup>130</sup> In other words, the first gay saint of the Episcopal Church was a disabled man whose Spiritual Friend was his primary caregiver through many years of complex and painful chronic illness, and who wrote with great tenderness about losing two great loves when they were still in their youth. He was added to the calendar at the request of LGBTQ activists during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when the disease was still highly stigmatized and poorly understood. St. Aelred himself was still quite obscure, and scholarship into medieval gender and sexuality had not yet developed to the point where it was possible to construct a more detailed understanding of the role that sexuality played in Aelred's life. His profound theology of interpersonal love and Integrity USA's faith that he would pray for the LGBTQ community were the impetuses behind his inclusion on the calendar.

Years went by. The Episcopal Church continued to work toward integrating the LGBTQ community into the full sacramental life of the Church, and conservatives within the Church reacted with increasing hostility. In 2009, the Anglican Church in North America officially separated from the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, claiming theological orthodoxy for themselves and arguing that these churches "increasingly

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129 "A St. Aelred," *Walking with Integrity* (blog).

130 "A St. Aelred," *Walking with Integrity* (blog).

accommodated and incorporated un-Biblical, un-Anglican practices and teaching."<sup>131</sup> As part of this process, they deliberately removed St. Aelred from their calendar of saints, and he remains excluded to this day. Integrity USA, meanwhile, declined and eventually disbanded in 2022.<sup>132</sup> St. Aelred, without a community of devotees, is increasingly ignored by progressive Christians who do not see a gay icon in a chaste medieval monk.

### **Aelred's Future**

Whenever I research queer saints and queer Christian history, one thing always stands out to me: the backlash. I expect this incurious behavior from the conservative Church, but it is much worse when it comes from the affirming Church, which has a bad habit of discarding teachers and elders that it perceives as problematic or irrelevant to the current struggle. The eternal pursuit of nebulously-defined progress is an idol that exists in some post-Enlightenment churches, but throwing down this idol does not mean giving up our dedication to respect and equality in matters of gender and sexuality. "Queer theology," as it is currently discussed behind paywalls, academic hierarchies, and gayborhood cliques, is wholly insufficient to meet the needs of either established congregants or curious newcomers. To begin with, the affirming Church could stand to demonstrate more humility in the way it approaches its queer saints, who still have much to teach us. This humility is often best demonstrated in places where one might not expect to see a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion. Small churches, rural churches, and churches in so-called flyover country can be the teachers of more prestigious urban churches, where inclusivity often does not present a significant challenge to the dominant culture. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Fargo, North Dakota proudly displays a beautiful rainbow window dedicated to St. Aelred, Integrity USA, and the LGBTQ community (fig. 2). Expensive windows are not necessary for every church, of course, but one material gesture is worth many reassurances that all are welcome.

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<sup>131</sup>"Our Genesis," Anglican Church in North America, last modified June 2009, accessed June 2, 2024, [https://web.archive.org/web/20110725201605/anglicanchurch.net/media/acna\\_our\\_genesis\\_june\\_2009.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20110725201605/anglicanchurch.net/media/acna_our_genesis_june_2009.pdf).

<sup>132</sup>Egan Millard, "LGBTQ+ Advocacy Group Integrity Formally Dissolves," Episcopal News Service, last modified April 19, 2022, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2022/04/19/lgbtq-advocacy-group-integrity-formally-dissolves/>.

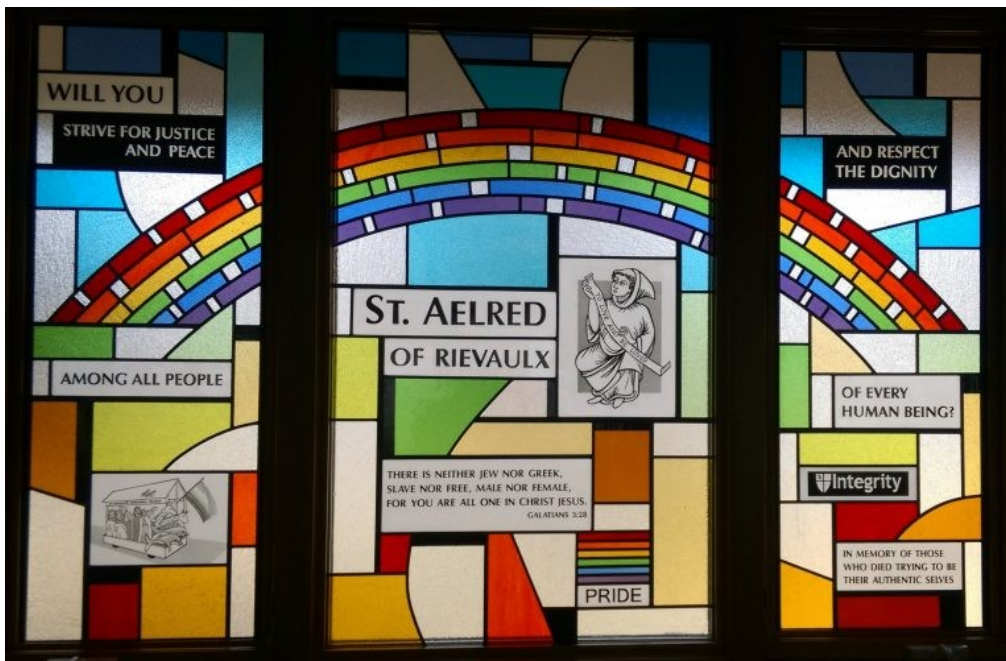


Fig. 2. The Integrity Window. St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. Accessed 12 January 2024. <http://ststephensfargo.org/glb-inclusion/>

If it were up to me, I would dedicate St. Aelred's feast day to LGBTQ history, both recent and not-so-recent. I would not simply have it be "Pride in January," or a day dedicated to decontextualized queer spirituality. St. Aelred's Day would be an opportunity to meet our queer ancestors and elders as they are, not as we would like them to be. It would be a day to study and reflect on the forces that shape our lives, as well as the way we push back and assert ourselves against a majority culture that is often hostile to us. The day might be dedicated to book discussions, film screenings, and study forums, or perhaps dialogues between LGBTQ elders and youth. It might be a day for the straight Church to show up and listen to LGBTQ Christians express themselves on their own terms, as Aelred does when we approach him with a reflection of his own charity and integrity. It might be a day of LGBTQ remembrance, especially of those lost during the early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the people who advocated and cared for them. It might be a day of truth and reconciliation for congregations wrestling with the harm they might have inflicted on their LGBTQ members, past and present. Since Christianity has, for better or worse, made such an issue out of gender and sexuality for the last two thousand years and counting, the least we could do is dedicate a day to studying the ways that Christian doctrines have intersected with the historical material realities of gender and sexuality and what it means for us in the present and future.

But it is not for me to decide what should be done with St. Aelred of Rievaulx going forward. I can only describe how I see him.

I see in St. Aelred a very wise friend, teacher, and queer elder with a fascinating history, both in his own time and in ours. He is rooted in his material context, but the relevance of his life and work transcends class, gender, sexuality, and physical ability. I am a gender-nonconforming lesbian with a disabled wife. I work in food service. I see many reasons to relate to St. Aelred in both joy and sorrow, and I am grateful for the scholars and activists who brought me to the awareness of such a unique patron. At times I am frustrated with the Church, both the progressive and the conservative wings, who wish to reduce him or use him as a token in their competing agendas without understanding his human complexities. I hope that this study can help the Church understand this great medieval saint in his unique and beautiful humanity, and to honor the courage and faith of the queer Christian elders who came before us.