Culture



Mexican artist Fabián Cháirez stands next to his 2019 painting showing Mexican Revolution hero Emiliano Zapata straddling on a horse nude, wearing high heels and a pink, broad-brimmed hat. His latest exhibition, "La venida del Señor", featured nine paintings depicting consecrated religious in sexually charged poses. (AP Photo/Marco Ugarte)



by Emma Cieslik

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 15, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Artist Fabián Cháirez's exhibition "*La venida del Señor*" ("The coming of the Lord") opened in February at the Academia de San Carlos Centro Historico in Mexico City. The exhibition featured a series of nine paintings created between 2018 and 2023, each one depicting consecrated religious in intimate or sexually charged poses, some of which suggest same-sex relationships.

Examples of depictions include two nuns holding robes and glasses of wine with their eyes shut in ecstasy, and priests shown licking Christ's nailed feet while he is hanging on the crucifix.



"Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" (1652) by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Wikimedia Commons)

The exhibition, Cháirez has explained, was "an exercise in which I make a comparison between religious ecstasy and sexual ecstasy, two things that would appear to be opposites but actually have more in common."

Not all see it that way. The Mexican chapter of the Association of Christian Lawyers filed a legal complaint against Cháirez with the National Council to Prevent Discrimination. The complaint was signed by 9,000 people arguing that the exhibition violated Article 24 of the Mexican Constitution, namely "the right to freely profess one's faith without being the object of attacks."

As word spread, Catholic protestors gathered outside of the building, accusing the artist of Christianophobia. They later staged a demonstration inside the gallery with caution tape blocking off some of the painting and wore t-shirts with the phrase "*No ofendas mi fe en nombre del arte*" ("Don't offend my faith in the name of art"). Protestors also carried signs that read "Blasphemy is not art."



"Saint Sebastian" (1615) by Guido Reni (public domain)

Eventually, Francisco Javier Rebolledo Peña, head of the Sixth District Court for Administrative Matters in Mexico City, granted the suspension order to shutter the exhibition, declaring that the gallery must suspend access to the art within 24 hours.

The exhibition has been closed, but the artistic practice of using bodily representations of ecstasy to depict spiritual euphoria is not new and will inevitably continue.

Gian Lorenzo Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa", for example, depicts the saint's eyes rolling backwards and body convulsing as an angel prepares to penetrate her with a fire tipped arrow. The sculptural altarpiece in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome has been cited by art historians as having sexual connotations true to descriptions from her own writings.

"The pain," she wrote of this experience in "The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila", "was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease... On several occasions when I was in this state the Lord was pleased that I should experience raptures so deep that I could not resist them even though I was not alone."



"The Lactation of St. Bernard of Clairvaux" (1650) by Alonso Cano (public domain)

Depictions of the nude St. Sebastian, his body riddled with arrows, grew in popularity in the Italian Renaissance when artists favored ephebic beauty. "Saint Bernard and the Virgin" by Alonso Cano depicts a vision described in Bernard's own words of Mary stopping mid-feeding of the infant Jesus to spray her milk into Bernard's lips, possibly to share wisdom through that which nourishes Jesus. The

image falls under the tradition of *Madonna lactans*, or the nursing Madonna.

Such works of art were produced by and for Catholics, often through the patronage of the church. And these same works had important ritual use; scholars have found evidence of readers touching and kissing the sacred side wounds of Christ in texts and images. In "Trans and Genderqueer Subjects in Medieval Hagiography", Sophie Sexon describes how readers would engage with the sacred side wounds of Christ in texts and icons in ways that challenged gender normative depictions of Jesus, and Dr. Maeve J. Doyle notes that images of Christ's wound show evidence of repeated stroking.

Advertisement

> To dismiss this exhibition is to ignore the rich artistic history of the Catholic Church.
>
> Tweet this

The church has a rich history of sexually poetic depictions of spiritual life. Our art history reflects how the ordained and consecrated remain humans with very human sexualities; it also affirms the existence of queerness throughout church history, from artists, to saints, to modern-day religious whose stories are still too rarely represented.

To dismiss this exhibition is to ignore the rich artistic history of the Catholic Church; a tradition that has long grappled with human sexuality within an institution that restricts how that sexuality can be expressed and practiced. Art offers an outlet for desires that cannot be actualized in a church that refuses to consecrate same-sex marriages, where living as one's authentic self remains divisive. A church where normal human sexuality — even heterosexuality — remains a heated issue.