Father Pavel Florensky and the Sacrament of Love

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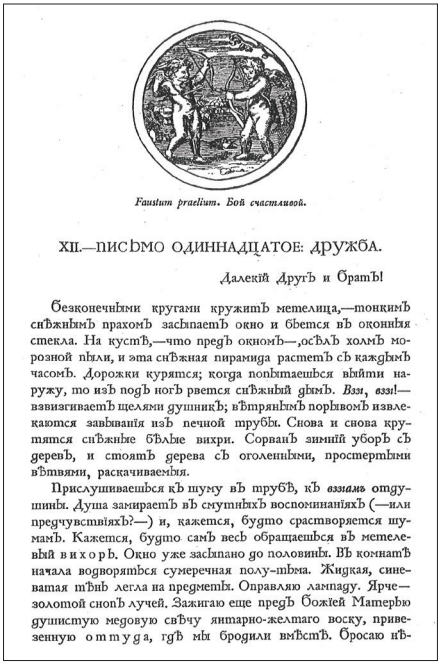

Faustum praelium. Бой счастливой.

XII.—ПИСЬМО ОДИННАДЦАТОЕ: ДРУЖБА.

Далекій Другъ и Братъ!

Безконечными кругами кружитъ метелица,—тонкимъ снѣжнымъ прахомъ засыпаетъ окно и бьется въ оконныя стекла. На кустѣ,—что предъ окномъ—,осѣлъ холмъ морозной пыли, и эта снѣжная пирамида растетъ съ каждымъ часомъ. Дорожки курятся; когда попытаешься выйти наружу, то изъ подъ ногъ рвется снѣжный дымъ. *Взя, взя!*—взвизгиваетъ щелями душникъ; вѣтрянымъ порывомъ извлекаются завыванія изъ печной трубы. Снова и снова крутятся снѣжные бѣлые вихри. Сорванъ зимній уборъ съ деревъ, и стоятъ деревья съ оголенными, простертыми вѣтвями, раскачиваемыя.

Прислушиваешься къ шуму въ трубѣ, къ *взяли отдушинѣ*. Душа замираетъ въ смутныхъ воспоминаніяхъ (—или предчувствіяхъ?—) и, кажется, будто сраствоpяется шумъ. Кажется, будто самъ весь обращаешься въ метелевый вихорь. Окно уже засыпано до половины. Въ комнатѣ начала водворяться сумеречная полу-тьма. Жидкая, синеватая тѣнь легла на предметы. Оправляю лампаду. Ярче—золотой снопъ лучей. Зажигаю еще предъ Божіей Матерью душистую медовую свѣчу янтарно-желтаго воску, привезенную отъ муда, гдѣ мы бродили вмѣстѣ. Бросаю въ-

First page of "Friendship," from Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914).

This essay introduces the author's doctoral research on "Friendship." It represents a partial response to questions that emerged following the appearance of his article "Conjugal Friendship" last May on the blog Public Orthodoxy, available at https://publicorthodoxy.org/2017/05/02/conjugal-friendship/.

Father Pavel Florensky's "Friendship," structurally and thematically the culminating letter of the twelve which comprise his 1914 book *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth,* has proven a challenge to his readers from the time that he first wrote it as part of his master's thesis to the present. A cursory reading in translation allows little room to imagine that it envisages "friends" in any conventional sense—the sort of friend of which a man might have two or three or several—or that he could have such a friend in addition to a wife. In the Russian original it becomes even clearer that Florensky articulates an unmistakably conjugal form of friendship. He describes the relationship as two male bodies sharing a single soul in "the sacrament of love," sanctified in the brother-making liturgy and in the couple's co-partaking of the Eucharist, and differing in no way from marriage in its premise of monogamy, bodily intimacy, cohabitation, common possessions, and mutual submission.[1] The historical, cultural, and especially biographical context in which Florensky wrote leaves little ambiguity concerning his personal interest in the recently discovered notion of "homosexuality" and in germinal ideas on the instabil-

ity of binary gender, long before the advent of postmodern queer theory.

The following pages touch only briefly on these aspects, but in reverse order: the wider context of Florensky's life and writings, his personal biography, and a few key considerations from his text. I conclude with some observations on his place—a full century later—in relation to one of the most challenging anthropological questions demanding a thoughtful Orthodox response today. Constraints of space permit me to do no more than sketch the basic contours of the argument that I will make at length in my doctoral dissertation.

Florensky in Context

Russian society's preoccupation with sex at the turn of the last century had its roots in social and political currents in Western Europe that had begun to surface earlier in the nineteenth century. The world stage onto which Florensky stepped in the opening years of the twentieth century had recently seen the invention of "the homosexual" as a "species" in 1860s Germany and the corollary rise of the first homosexual liberation movements.[2] The era went on to produce such provocative personalities as Oscar Wilde and André Gide. When the definitive cultural history of *fin-de-siècle* Europe is written to include Russia, Florensky must take his uneasy place alongside these two to form a triad of literary giants who wrote self-consciously from their experience and acceptance of same-sex desire. The unease lies in a fundamental difference between them: namely, that Florensky, a devout Orthodox Christian, exhibited none of the sexual adventurism and marital infidelities for which Wilde and Gide will always be remembered. Yet, if Wilde remains forever associated with Lord Alfred Douglas in our cultural memory, and Gide with Marc Allégret, by the same token we can never separate Florensky from the tenderly beloved dedicatee and addressee of his theological magnum opus, the inspiration for his erotic poetry, and his intended life-companion, Sergei Troitsky.

The era sounds remarkably like our own. Its interest in all things sexual took the same widely divergent forms in Russia as elsewhere in Europe, running the gamut from pornography and erotic fiction to experiments in open marriage, a growing tolerance of homosexuality, and revisions in civil legislation pertaining to such matters as rape, prostitution, and consensual same-sex acts. To some extent Russia followed Europe's lead in adopting changes through the late nineteenth century to mitigate the penalization of same-sex acts. In the end, it stopped short of decriminalizing them, despite calls from more liberal voices in Russian jurisprudence.[3]

In all of this fixation on sex, Russia came to play a unique role in the domain of theology and religious philosophy. Olivier Clément credits "Russian religious philosophers who were the first in the Christian world to have sensed the spiritual meaning of Eros and who began to surmount the deadly schism that had inserted itself between human love and Christianity." These thinkers "carried within themselves this expectation of a love appropriately personal, free, and reciprocal, the expectation that characterizes modernity."[4] Yet he neglects to mention, even parenthetically, Florensky's exploration of the spiritual

[1] Scholarship on brother-making emerged in Russia in the latter part of the nineteenth century, more than a hundred years before John Boswell's controversial *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994). Florensky provides a partial but extensive bibliography in Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*, trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), n. 809.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1990), 43. See also Karl-Maria Kertbeny, *Schriften zur Homosexualitätsforschung*, ed. Manfred Herzer (Berlin: Verlag Rosa Winkel, 2000) and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie* (Stuttgart: F. Enke, 1886). Kertbeny coined the term "homosexual" in a private letter of 1868.

[3] See Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

meaning of love between men. Richard Gustafson remedies this omission when he remarks that "Florensky's notion of friendship has a decided homophilic, if not homoerotic, tinge. All dyadic friendships in his discussion are same-sex unions. . . . To my knowledge, Florensky's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* is the first Christian theology to place same-sex relationship at the center of its vision."[5]

During this period Vasily Rozanov stands out as one of the more controversial religious philosophers to grapple with the problem of sex. He further developed the idea of "universal bisexuality" put forth by such German authorities in the nascent field of sexuality studies as Richard Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Otto Weininger. They applied the term not so much to sexual orientation as to the male and female aspects of which every person was presumed to be constituted. Without the postmodern concept of a *spectrum* of sexual orientation and gender identity in their lexicon, these men felt that one's relative degree of masculinity or femininity determined the gender to which one would be principally attracted.[6]

Rozanov's importance for this essay lies in the extent to which Florensky agreed with his ideas in an exchange of letters after his marriage, the birth of his first child, and his ordination to the priesthood. In a long missive to Rozanov from November 17–21, 1912, Florensky considers it indisputable that gender exists in a fluid state and there can be no question of concrete gender.[7] Three years earlier, in a conversation not long before his surprise marriage, Florensky had posited the absence of an essential correlation between gender and biological sex to account for his own predilection for men and lack of interest in women (to this conversation we shall return shortly). Rozanov, Florensky, and their German predecessors anticipate by nearly a century and more Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* and the ongoing development of gender theory in our own day.

Pavel Florensky

Pavel Florensky was born in Azerbaijan to a Russian father and an Armenian mother in January 1882 and raised in Tbilisi. Despite being baptized in infancy, he received the secular upbringing of so many of his generation in Russia's educated classes. In memoirs written for his children, he describes without embarrassment his early childhood as a time of disillusionment that he had not been born a girl and would have to renounce his fascination with fabrics, perfumes, and jewelry, and his dream of one day owning a woman's hat with a hummingbird. At his mother's distasteful reaction to a girlishly romantic painting that he made for her at the age of five, "not only I myself but all the brides within me, the princesses, the crowns . . . were instantly shrivelled, consumed by burning shame."[8]

In adolescence, he ran with an intellectually precocious set of boys who immersed themselves in Plato's ideas on love, reading the same canon that offered their contemporaries in Western Europe a philosophical framework for erotic feelings between men. He found his first great love in his schoolmate Alexander Elchaninov.[9] The latter's inability to reciprocate the intensity of Florensky's devotion brought their relationship crashing to an end, with all the melodrama of

[4] Olivier Clément, "Foreword," in Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985),

[5] Richard F. Gustafson, "Introduction to the Translation," in Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, xix–xx.

[6] See Evgenii Bershtein, "The Notion of Universal Bisexuality in Russian Religious Philosophy," in *Understanding Russianness*, ed. Risto Alapuro, Arto Mustajoki, and Pekka Pesonen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 210–31.

[7] V. V. Rozanov, *Literaturnye izgnanniki: Kniga vtoraya* (Moscow: Respublika, 2010), 81.

[8] Avril Pyman, *Pavel Florensky: A Quiet Genius* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 6.

[9] Elchaninov later wrote *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

any teenage romance, when they were seventeen and sixteen respectively. The break precipitated a crisis that marked the beginning of Florensky's religious awakening. Yet it was not until he was twenty-one and a student of mathematics at Moscow University that he committed himself to the Orthodox Church as part of the movement of "returning intelligentsia." A year later he abandoned a promising career to enroll at the Moscow Theological Academy.

There he met and fell in love with Troitsky, a priest's son one year ahead of him in his studies. The two became roommates. In 1905, Florensky included his first public declaration of love for the unnamed Troitsky at the end of a published article, establishing the pattern that would culminate in the epistolary form of *Pillar and Ground*. In this article he reminisces about falling asleep in a remote train station with his head on Troitsky's lap: "Perhaps, in that cold night, hungry and exhausted, I was completely at peace for the first time in my life."[10] Two days before his birthday in 1906, Florensky delivered a paper to the philosophical circle of the Moscow Theological Academy that begins, "To my uniquely cherished friend, Sergei Semionovich Troitsky."[11] On the feast of the Meeting of the Lord two weeks later, he composed the poem "Two Knights." It depicts a scene in which the knights have removed their armor and laid it under an aspen tree, where resin drips on it from a quivering leaf. The knights kiss on the mouth, embrace tightly "like brothers," and "break their spears" with each other. Even the sun undresses as it sets amidst fiery clouds. Tears flow in almost every stanza.[12]

[10] Pyman, *Florensky*, 59.

[11] *Pavel Florensky: Early Religious Writings, 1903–1909*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 119.

[12] "Dva rytsarya," in *Pavel Florensky i simvolisty: Opyty literaturnye. Stat'i. Perepiska*, ed. E. V. Ivanov (Moscow: Yazyki Slavyanskoi Kultury, 2004), 158–59.

Pavel Florensky and Sergei Troitsky in the courtyard of the Moscow Theological Academy in 1906, the year Florensky composed "Two Knights." Photo in Andronik (Trubachev), *Put' k Bogu: Lichnost', zhizn' i tvorchestvo svyaschennika Pavla Florenskogo*, kniga vtoraya (Sergiev Posad: Fond nauki i pravoslavnoi kultury svyaschennika Pavla Florenskogo, 2015), pl. 42.

Troitsky, for his part, wrote to a friend of the hopes that he and Florensky shared of spending the rest of their life together in a cottage in the forests of Kostroma: "Pavlia and I have sometimes talked ourselves into a state of hallucination describing such a life to one another."[13]

Events took a different turn. After the two spent the summer of 1907 together at the Florensky home in Tbilisi, Troitsky stayed behind to accept a teaching post while Florensky returned to Moscow to write the thesis that eventually became *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. From loneliness during Florensky's protracted absence and a desire to follow in his father's footsteps as a priest, Troitsky did the unthinkable in January 1909 and entered into an unconsummated marriage with Florensky's sister, Olga. They naively expected that Florensky would come to live with them.
Florensky refused to attend the wedding. He occasionally took to drink, and experimented with hashish and opium. His appearance and health deteriorated. He rushed into a relationship with a new friend. His old schoolmate Elchaninov questioned his "indifference to ladies and frequent falling in love with young men." As he recorded in his diary in July 1909:

> For a long time we muddled along in search of explanations, then P[avel] stumbled upon the following hypothesis. A man seeks an object sufficiently passive to receive his energy. For the majority of men, such objects are women. There are insufficiently masculine natures who seek their complement in masculine men, but there are also hyper-masculine men, for whom the feminine is too yielding, as yielding as a cushion, for instance, to a steel blade. That kind seeks and loves simply men, or insufficiently masculine men.[14]

Most remarkable in this conversation—aside from its anticipation of Florensky's correspondence with Rozanov three years later—is their frank curiosity about homosexuality without any trace of moral censure.

In August 1910, Florensky also did the unthinkable by marrying his new friend's sister, Anna Giatsintova, "simply to fulfil the will of God"—which he thought to have discerned in a four-leaf clover—"without any sign of being in love," a "rude shock" to everyone who knew of his disinterest in women. A friend who visited them a week later reported that "there's something vulnerable about [Florensky] . . . glimpses of deep sadness."[15] They went on to have three sons and two daughters between 1911 and 1924. On consecutive days in April 1911, Florensky was ordained to the diaconate and the priesthood.

Troitsky did not live to become a priest. In November 1910, he was murdered outside the school where he taught by seventeen-year-old Georgian nationalist.

The Pillar and Ground of the Truth and "Friendship"

When Florensky returned to Moscow in the fall of 1907, leaving Troitsky behind with his family, he began work on the master's thesis that would be published seven years later as *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. In the years leading to the book's release in 1914, Troitsky married, Florensky married, Troitsky died, Florensky was

[13] Pyman, *Florensky*, 67.

[14] Ibid., 70–71.

[15] Ibid., 85–86.

Detail from first page of "Friendship." True to the principles of the Aestheticist movement, Florensky oversaw every detail of his book's physical appearance, including its blue cover (to symbolize Sophia), emblems on the frontispiece and at the head of each chapter, and an ornate typeface.

ordained, and his first child turned three. Yet he did not replace its heartbreaking dedication to Troitsky with one to his wife, nor did he substitute a treatise on marriage for his theology of same-sex love.

Two remarks serve to illumine the somewhat cryptic dedication, "Two Worlds." First, Florensky conflates his sadness at two events separated by a span of three years: his solitary return to the room that he and Troitsky had shared at the Moscow Theological Academy—"Our vaulted room greeted me with coldness, sadness, and loneliness when I opened its door for the first time after my trip. But alas, I entered it alone, without you"—and Troitsky's violent death—"Nevertheless, with a kind of tranquil grief, I repeat before *our* cross, which you made from an ordinary stick . . . I repeat, 'Lord! If Thou hadst been here, my Brother would not have died.'"[16]

Second, it is as a married priest and the father of a three-year-old son (when *Pillar and Ground* went to press) that he addresses these words to Troitsky: "But you are not with me, and the whole world seems deserted. I am alone, absolutely alone in the whole world." In an apparent allusion to their love-making under the aspen tree in "Two Knights," he continues, "It seems that my whole soul is melting in sweet agony at the sight of these fluttering leaves as I smell 'the fragrance of faded aspen groves.'" He concludes, "And I, after all, am nothing more than a pupil who repeats after you the lessons of love."[17]

The letter "Friendship" begins with an emblem selected by Florensky himself from a polyglot album commissioned by Peter the Great.[18] It depicts two male cupids, stark naked and playful, shooting at each other with their bows and arrows. One throws up his hands in laughing surrender to the other. The inscription reads, "*Faustum praelium*. Бой счастливой. Happy battle." At the start, Florensky signals to his reader a relationship rooted in the initial headiness of a romantic attraction between two young men, what he calls "the earthquake of the soul" of falling in love, which "shakes up a person's whole structure" and "opens for him the doors of the worlds on high, whence drifts the cool of paradise."[19]

[16] Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, 10–13.

[17] Ibid., 10–13.

[18] Daniel de la Feuille, *Symbola et emblemata: devises et emblèmes anciennes et modernes* (Amsterdam: Apud Henricum Wetstenium, 1705).

[19] Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, 285.

[20] Ibid., 318.

[21] Sv. Pavel Florensky, *Stolp i Utverzhdenie Istiny: Opyt Pravoslavnoi Teoditsei v Dvenadtsati Pis'mah*, facsimile of the 1914 original (Westmead, UK: Gregg International, 1970), 444.

Paradoxically, Florensky's conjugal vision of friendship is nowhere less ambiguous than when he likens the couple's relationship to monasticism. The marital analogy fairly leaps off the page in Russian:

> Yes. And every friendship, like Christian life in general, is in this sense monasticism. Each of the friends uncomplainingly humbles himself before his life-companion, in the same manner as a servant before his master.
>
> Да; и всякая дружбы, какъ и вообще жизнь христїанская въ этомъ смыслѣ есть монашество. Каждый изъ друзей безропотно смиряется предъ своимъ спутникомъ жизни, какъ слуга предъ господиномъ. [20]

The expression *sputnik zhizni*—rendered by Jakim as "life-companion"—means literally a co-wayfarer of life, one's fellow walker on the path of a shared life. As if the imagery were not powerful enough in translation, in Russian it refers to one's *husband*. Every native speaker with whom I have discussed this has been shocked to hear it in Florensky's context: *Each of the friends uncomplainingly humbles himself before his husband, as a servant before his lord.*

"Friendship" speaks for itself; one has only to read it. That it has nothing to do with any ordinary understanding of the word was obvious to Florensky's academic superiors. The rector of the Moscow Theological Academy, Bishop Fyodor (Pozdeevsky), deemed it too controversial for the Synod and unlikely to be accepted, and threatened to resign as examiner unless it was excised from the thesis. Only with his degree in hand did the husband, father, and priest reinsert the offending chapter for publication.[21]

Conclusion

Inevitably, an essay as short as this answers a few questions but raises many more. I have attempted not so much to anticipate every possible objection as to offer a key to unlock what I believe to be the correct interpretation of Father Florensky's life and writing in all their complexity. The twenty-first century reader seeking a facile theological justification of "marriage equality" or "gay sex" may be disappointed to find only mystery and subtlety.

Yet mystery and subtlety are precisely what our work in Orthodox anthropology requires. The more complex the questions—such as those surrounding sexuality and gender—the greater the need to approach them with the humility befitting a mystery. At the heart of our anthropology stands the human person whose innate beauty and goodness as bearer of the divine image and acquirer of the divine likeness remain unvanquished by sin. Saint Maximus the Confessor makes the astonishing assertion that we become God by grace *to no less a degree* than he became human by nature: if this is so, we must confess an apophatic anthropology as the corollary of our apophatic theology. Each human person, no less than God, becomes irreducible to any ideas that we might have about him or her, and most especially irreducible to what we imagine to be his or her sin. So too must we proclaim the irreducibility of human love to its fallenness; for what is our love for one another—however weakened, however injured, however

inadequate—if not the ineffable image of divine eros?

If "Friendship" seems to leave much unsaid about the place of same-sex desire in a life transfigured by grace—for instance, in its apparent unconcern for female couples—we would do well to keep in mind two things: first, Florensky set out specifically to memorialize his relationship with Troitsky; and second, the letter's apparent incompleteness typifies the way in which living tradition reveals itself from age to age. Each generation of the Church, working out its salvation in such a time and such a place, receives fully intact from its forefathers and foremothers the faith delivered once for all to the saints, and seeks the purity of heart to build—in new circumstances, faced with new questions—upon the foundation that has been laid, remaining ever faithful to the same Jesus Christ and the same gospel preached from the beginning.

In starting from the premise of the innate holiness and beauty of same-sex love, Father Pavel Florensky—a priest of unquestioned sanctity whose formal glorification as a confessor or martyr many await—opens a door for us and shows us a way. His work has lain dormant for a hundred years. The time has now come to take up this sacred task where he left off, and to proceed with wisdom and charity to one of the most important anthropological and pastoral questions of our time. ❋

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