“I Seek My Satisfaction in You”:
The Sexual Discourses of Eugène Prévost, Religious Founder

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Summary: Father Eugène Prévost (1860-1946) is the founder of two small Roman Catholic religious orders dedicated to the material and spiritual care of priests: for men, the Fraternité Sacerdotale; for women, the Oblates of Bethany. Born in rural Québec, his religious training and thinking were fairly typical of the French Canadian Catholic environment of that time. His spirituality centres on the motif of Jesus as priest and victim. Father Prévost’s extensive writings, often rather sentimental in the extreme, are remarkable for their sexual overtones, particularly their use of homoerotic language and imagery. This paper examines some of the more significant themes of this “eroticized” discourse.

On the third of June 1887, the eve of his ordination as a priest, a twenty-seven year old Eugène Prévost wrote the following:

Jesus whispered words so strong and tender, that my entire being was wrapped up in them: “I have come to take possession of you, Jesus said; you belong to me”. These last words especially were like a flash of lightning; I have rarely felt the impact of Jesus so intimately. I was entranced by Him, wrapped in a coat of fire. Never had Jesus made me feel His presence so keenly. I truly and perceptibly felt that He was taking hold of me, that I was in His full possession, that He was penetrating me in the most intimate part of my being, that He was possessing me in an ineffable manner, that I was annihilated in Him, and that He alone lived in me. (Hamelin 1999: 65)

Some two years earlier, on the occasion of a retreat, Prévost had heard Jesus say something similar: “I seek my satisfaction in you. (...) Rest in my love. (...) My child, I place my pleasure in you. I am pleased in you. (...) I love you.” (Hamelin 1999: 62)

Though these words are an obvious reference to those from the New Testament spoken on the occasion of the public baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”), they also touch upon something far more enticing; indeed, plainly erotic. They are part of a long and important mystical tradition in Christianity which speaks of union with the divine in terms of sexualized language and imagery. In the case of Eugène Prévost, they further hint at a certain homoerotic quality which, given the temper of the man and the climate of his times, probably had no other suitable or acceptable means of expressing itself. In this paper, I suggest that, in his life’s
work, Prévost would “act out” a number of elements and themes found in his spiritual writings, much of which was concerned with mystical understandings of the Catholic priesthood. I further argue that it is possible—indeed, quite necessary—to read his texts as sexual scripts, insofar as they express Prévost’s intimate affection, if not love, for the “sacred” state of the priesthood and its embodiment in individual men as priests.3

Though it may appear Freudian on the surface, my theoretical approach borrows quite freely and deliberately from cultural studies, more particularly queer theory. When applied to the study of religion, queer theory highlights non-normative sexual and erotic “performances” as fundamental, though ultimately unstable, components of the religious experience. Queer theory looks above, beyond and under—away from the everyday, the expected and the habitual—in deciphering and reading the heterogeneous sexual codes that religious devotion carries and embodies.4 In this sense, Prévost’s tenacious, almost obsessive fascination with priests, and his life-long work of subjecting his unspoken desires to theirs, can be viewed, I would submit, from the perspective of queer longings unfulfilled yet ultimately transcended. His work in the Church, under the urging of an intense and mutual love for Jesus the Priest and Victim, was really about service to an idealized and eroticized priestly cast of males. While this no doubt echoed the cultural tenor of his time and place, it carried as well, and perhaps most significantly, the promise of emotional and psychic resolution for the highly suggestive cleric that he was.

Eugène Prévost is the founder of two Roman Catholic religious orders dedicated to the physical and spiritual care of priests: for men, the Fraternité Sacerdotale; and for women, the Oblates of Bethany. Neither is, in fact, very large (some fifty members for the Fraternité; some one hundred for the Oblates). His spirituality, rooted in the cult of
the Eucharist, focused on a somewhat unique theme in the history of Catholic devotional practice: that of Jesus, Priest and Victim. (As an obvious mark of respect, Prévost always capitalized the word “Priest” in his writings.) The two always go together. The supreme priesthood of Jesus, and consequently of all those priests who share in it, is a function of his role as sacred victim, and vice-versa. Prévost was obsessed with this idea, to the point where he and some of his earliest confrères took a special vow of what might be called, rather revealingly, “victimhood,” i.e., they would place themselves, to the point of complete physical and psychological annihilation of self, totally at the service of priests, understood as carriers of the divine priesthood of Jesus. No doubt, there are significant masochistic elements to this practice. It is, however, totally in keeping with Prévost’s own rather poetic descriptions of his possession—indeed, his ravaging—by Jesus at the time of his ordination. By becoming a priest, he himself became a victim to the holiest and most victimized of all priests. He would therefore live out his calling by becoming a victim to other priests, particularly by caring for them in the most exemplary and selfless ways possible. Moreover, he would impose impossibly high and rigid standards on the members of his own nascent religious orders: they would need to be as dedicated, self-effacing and hard-working as he was in the service of priests.

**Biography and Context**

Joseph Victor Alexandre Eugène Prévost was born on the twenty-fourth of August 1860, the eighth in a family of fifteen, in the town of Saint-Jérôme in the Laurentians, some fifty kilometres north of Montréal. His father was a doctor, and Eugène benefited from a formal classical education, as was proper at that time for the son of an esteemed member of the so-called liberal professions. He also studied with the influential
Sulpician priests in Montréal and, at the age of twenty-one, left for Brussels, where he entered the novitiate of the relatively new Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, a religious order dedicated to the propagation of Eucharistic devotion. After studies at the Gregorian University in Rome for four years, he took vows and was ordained a priest in the Congregation, whereupon he was assigned to work in its outreach activities to priests, a ministry at which he would prove quite successful. He would continue to do so, on and off, for the next thirteen years. In 1899, after much hesitation, he left the Congregation to begin the work of founding his own groups. (Hamelin 1999: 3-134)

From this first part of Eugène Prévost’s life, three elements need to be singled out: the first, his apparent “conversion,” as he himself called it, at the age of seventeen, when he decides, upon hearing the voice of Jesus gently reprimanding him, no longer to be an undisciplined student, but rather to strive for sainthood; the second, his mystical musings around the time of his ordination in 1887, when he receives the “grace” of an awareness of the supreme glory of the role of the priest in the church, including his own priestly vocation, and how this ties into a theology of Jesus as priest and victim; and third, and perhaps most important in terms of his own future, his continued inability to get along with his superiors in the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. Eugène Prévost was not, in fact, the most submissive of priests, and this accounts, in large measure, for his eventual break with the Congregation. Perhaps his was not the most accommodating of personalities, nor the most humble. Already, in these significant life events, one can trace some of the more negative traits of Prévost’s temperament: prudery and rigidity, lack of compassion for others, authoritarianism, and a tendency to take personal revelation as being spiritually normative. One of the more striking features of such an attitude is the
claim that Jesus intervenes personally in his life to set him on the proper path, or to share a significant truth with him. This characteristic will emerge as dominant in Prévost’s personality, to the point that, much later, he will state quite openly that his words and wishes as founder are the same as those of Jesus himself, and must therefore be obeyed absolutely and without question.⁶

Eugène Prévost was undoubtedly a pious student and seminarian. It is uncertain what exactly may have happened to “convert” him from a rambunctious seventeen year-old student to one seeking sainthood, but it is clear that he was possessed by an acute sense of sin and guilt that remained with him throughout his life, and that would find its initial flowering, some ten years later at the time of his ordination, in a theology of Jesus as the priestly victim. Psychologist and priest Georges Perreault has observed that this unresolved tension between sin and guilt in Prévost’s early life, which always threatened to flow over into an unhealthy masochism, was eventually sublimated into a theological equation of priesthood with suffering. (1999: 541-51) This masochism obviously had an erotic quality to it. In the endearing words Jesus would have spoken to him on the verge of his ordination, one gets a clear sense that Prévost, the young priest, wanted nothing more than to submit himself spiritually and psychologically, but also physically, to the sensual promptings of Jesus, the model priest. The identification of regular, everyday priestly suffering with the uniquely redemptive suffering of the most perfect of all priests, Jesus, becomes absolute. On the priestly body was acted out the drama of transformative sacrificial pain, yet these were male bodies merging in their suffering, and the implied homoeroticism appears never far from the surface of things. Perhaps also, the issue of Prévost’s ambivalence with respect to authority and power should be located here. If
your suffering is validated by Jesus, the high priest himself, what need have you of the
dictates of less perfect priestly figures, even though they may hold formal authority over
you? And if your voice as founder is equal to that of this most perfect priest and victim
of them all, then of course it is not to be questioned.

Yet Eugène Prévost’s life also demonstrates quite eloquently the accomplishments
that can emerge from the energy and drive of a forceful personality. Though his major
life period as religious founder (1901-1946) was marked by some severe personal and
professional failures, by formal canonical investigations under the jurisdiction of the
Vatican, by much poverty, and by the internment of his French priests and nuns during
the Second World War, he managed to found two religious orders, and, upon his death in
1946, he left ten functioning houses for the Fraternité (in France, Italy and Canada) and
two convents for the Oblates (in France and Canada). Thousands of priests in some
personal or spiritual difficulty would have passed through these houses. Eugène Prévost
had a talent for the “ways of the world,” and he often claimed that Jesus personally
encouraged him in these efforts. He was good at raising and managing funds, at building
powerful contacts in the clerical bureaucracy, and at handling real estate. Though a
meddler and a perfectionist in the administration of his two religious orders, and despite
riding his early collaborators quite hard at times, Eugène Prévost did, in fact, prevail. 7

Mention must be made of a particularly significant relationship in Eugène
Prévost’s life which had a major impact on his psychological well-being: that with his
youngest sister, Ninette. From an early age, Prévost took her under his wing, believing
that he was called to mould her into a model of virginal sanctity. She became one of the
very first Oblates. When Ninette left the fledgling religious group in her mid-thirties, and
subsequently discovered her feelings for another man, her brother felt terribly betrayed. There appears to have been a powerful affective dynamic at play in their relationship, at least on Prévost’s part, which may point to a lingering erotic tension in his spiritual and psychological makeup. For example, the letters which he wrote to his sister in the latter years of their relationship are remarkable for the manner in which Prévost borrows the voice of Jesus in reminding Ninette of her vow of holy chastity, as though the so-called betrayal was against himself as the mystical bridegroom/brother, rather than Jesus. The use of pseudo-mystical matrimonial language and imagery, reminiscent of that found in other Christian spiritual writing, appears oddly enticing and suggestive.⁸ (Perreault in Hamelin 1999: 537-40)

Prévost’s unsuccessful “spiritual” relationship of superior to dependant with his sister Ninette is important for two reasons. First, it raises the very real possibility of some element of failure in his life’s calling, and there are indications that Prévost read it as such. Second, could it not also symbolize for him the sought after confirmation of his inability to form sustaining opposite-sex relationships, even with someone as intimate and non-sexual as a sister? The fact that Prévost should have turned to this sister as the inspiration and eventual model for a group of vowed women in service to the material needs of priests not only points to a fairly typical understanding of nineteenth-century womanhood, but perhaps also to an unspoken, though keenly sensed, desire for sisterly submission to his own emotional exigencies.

Eugène Prévost was certainly a man of his times, and the French Canadian type of Catholicism in which he grew up and was formed was exceptional in both its scope and impact. Characterized by an omnipresent clerical traditionalism, ultramontanism was the
dominant paradigm in Québec Catholicism for close to a century. Though it began its
decline in the late 1800s, it continued to exert a formidable influence on the religious life
of French Canadian Catholics well into the 20th century. An example of a type of clerico-
religious ideology, heavily rural and conservative in its focus, one of its hallmarks was a
tenacious belief in the pre-eminence of church power over secular power. Inspired in
large part by the papacy of Pius IX and his stubborn stance against the loss of the Papal
States in Italy, this religious worldview was heavily centred on the person of the pope
(sometimes to the point of idolatry) as the true vicar of Christ—but, as in the case of Pius,
a suffering vicar who was under attack by secular liberal forces. In this system, clerics
were given an elevated status, and in many Québec rural parishes, it was the priest who
effectively assumed the role of community arbiter on a great variety of religious and
explicitly worldly matters. Priests were people who very much mattered, and who often
exerted a strong moral and political suasion. The calling to the priesthood was seen in
almost mystical terms, and even young seminarians were treated with deference. It was
not uncommon for large families to encourage one or more of their sons to study for the
priesthood. Minor seminaries were opened, in the belief that priestly vocations could be
nourished in boys as young as ten or eleven. Ultramontanism was very much an ideology
by and for the clerical class. The influence of such elevated views of the priesthood on
the thinking of Eugène Prévost should not be underestimated; they fashioned who and
what he was, and how he came to understand the special missions of his religious orders.9

The other striking feature of French Canadian Catholicism at this time, perhaps
more Tridentine in tone, was its tactile and visceral, though very public, devotional life.
This was centred on the Catholic liturgical year, most notably the feast days in honour of
Jesus and Mary, but also those of a large number of major and minor saints. Devotions such as those to the Sacred Heart of Jesus or to Christ the King, the Holy Family or the Virgin in a variety of guises, pilgrimages—as well as public processions glorifying the Blessed Sacrament (the Body of Christ, Corpus Christi)—all these marked Québec Catholics for generations. Equally significant—because they reflected so well the dynamics of clerical power—were feasts, celebrations and jubilees marking and displaying, in a confidently public way, sacerdotal anniversaries. This was a defiantly collective faith—proud and confident of its truth—but also one open to human frailty. There was an overriding emphasis on concepts of suffering and penance, and on sin as an ever-present and pressing danger. The popular religiosity of this era accentuated the transcendent, but in a colourful earthly guise. It is from this fertile terrain emphasizing at once supreme clerical power and a rich sense of an immanent, bodily-centred sacred that the uniquely fervent spirituality of Eugène Prévost would emerge and find its voice.10

The Spirituality of the Victim

The central motif of Father Prévost’s spirituality is without doubt that of Jesus as priest and victim. This idea dominates his thinking and his extensive writings, and it constitutes the real raison d’être of his two religious orders. Such an understanding of the priestly nature of the ever-suffering Christ, a rigidly orthodox Catholic belief, is grounded in a theology of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, a clear indication of Prévost’s debt to the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, the religious order in which he first took vows, but which he subsequently left. As mentioned, among the founding purposes of this Congregation were perpetual adoration of the exposed host and outreach to priests in sustaining their ministry, particularly in helping them develop a spirituality focused on
the Eucharist. Still today, the Fraternité Sacerdotale, Eugène Prévost’s own religious community, lists two of its official purposes as: “adoration of Jesus the Priest,” and “responding to the needs of priests.” Interestingly enough, the reference to “victim” has been dropped. Presumably, this idea was thought to be theologically and culturally anachronistic, since today the term “victim” has seriously negative overtones at odds with our medico-legal context.

What did Eugène Prévost mean by the expression “Jesus, Priest and Victim?” On one level, it is the leitmotif through which he justifies his charisma and his ministry as a religious founder, and it also embodies the reasons for the rigid discipline that he imposes on his followers. Care and respect for priests has to flow from a deep understanding of Jesus himself as the original model of the self-effacing, altruistic priest who let himself become a victim out of love for others: the priest as semi-divine intermediary. The priests and nuns of his religious orders must embody and exemplify in their own lives this total dedication to the material and spiritual welfare of priests, who themselves partake of the divine priesthood of Jesus. Prévost is not at all shy about talking of priests in terms of love and affection. The uniquely repetitive tone of his language strikes one as quite sentimental and poetic. In September 1886, the year before his ordination, he wrote the following words in his personal journal:

(…) nothing makes me suffer more than this love for Priests. It is almost a state of passion for me (…). To speak to a Priest, to speak of a Priest, to write to a Priest, to think of a Priest, this sets me afire, and this single name of Priest has a magical effect on my soul (…). I cannot separate the idea of the Priest from the idea of the Eucharist. (Chrétien 2002: 99-100)
In a letter written in July 1900, the year of his departure from the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, to his sister Ninette, who will later be among the earliest Oblates and for a while their superior general, Prévost states:

I feel Jesus calling me, I see his dear Priests awaiting me, and already I wish I had spilt all my blood for them. If you only knew how much the Priesthood personifies Jesus for me. (…) This Jesus who has captured my heart I now only see as the eternal Priest who multiplies his love by prolonging his Priesthood in the souls of Priests. (Chrétien 2001: 85) 

Though there is an almost eerie conflation of theology and personal passion, if not love, in these texts, the words and sentiments are tinged, I would suggest, with a note of masochism. The writings of Eugène Prévost are replete with such vivid images of self-effacement, abnegation and suffering in the service of priests. The characterization of Jesus as a sacred victim makes possible a legitimate theological paradigm for this sort of rhetoric, but it can also be seen as an unconscious way for Prévost positively to define his very self as that of a victim subjugated to other males, imbued as these males are with the sacred aura of a priestly election. Selfless in the service of priests—and defining himself as a substitute, if not a scapegoat—he partakes of the paradigmatic sacrifice of the one original priest and victim, Jesus himself. Hence his burning and pressing desire to spill his own blood for his fellow priests. It is in this context that his vow of “victimhood” can perhaps best be understood: as the canonical embodiment of a psychological urge, the need to be loved and possessed by other men by submitting to them. Jesus the Victim provides the ultimate theological and spiritual justification; in fact, it might have been the only reasonable way that Eugène Prévost could make sense of his innermost feelings.
A Eucharistic spirituality can be understood as one founded on, and ultimately obsessed with, the human body, in particular the holy body of a god-man. Eucharistic devotion was a hallmark of Tridentine Catholicism, whether in the form of confident public displays of faith such as Corpus Christi processions or the Forty Hours, or more private types of veneration such as nocturnal adoration of the exposed host. At times, the Eucharistic bread or the tabernacle which housed it were portrayed in devotional imagery as superimposed with the crucified body of Jesus, the fiery Sacred Heart, or the bleeding instruments of the Passion.\textsuperscript{15} From the adoration of the victimized and holy body and blood of Jesus (one of the stated purposes of Prévost’s religious communities: the one he initially joined, as well as the two he founded) to the compelling desire to become a symbolic “victim” in the religious and material service of the bodies of other men—who are often not quite as holy—the margin is at times not wide, nor is the leap huge. In line with other types of Catholic spirituality (St. John of the Cross or even St. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example\textsuperscript{16}), it can be argued that the spirituality of Father Prévost is, at its core, all about the care of, and reverence for, male bodies, as are the special aim and purpose, though unspoken of course, of his two religious orders. As well, a theology of victimhood, particularly one so intimately tied to satisfying the needs of male bodies, reverses and re-inscribes, in some important ways, the gender dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. Feminized males (priests) and subservient females (nuns) both find themselves in the service of the ultimate male body: that of Jesus present in the host but also in the bodies of his priests who share in his redemptive work, and who are therefore equally worthy of every respect, praise and adulation.\textsuperscript{17} Could this be a subtle form of displacement? Prévost always understood the calling to the priesthood as mimicking the
sacrifice of Jesus-as-victim. His concern was to ease this burden carried by the symbolic human victim that is the priest. He therefore placed himself and his religious followers in the role of willing victim, almost as sacrificial substitutes: the willing victims (the men and women of his religious communities), serving the symbolic victims (priests), serving the primal Victim (Jesus the Priest).¹⁸

During his lifetime, Eugène Prévost also tried, without much success, to spread devotion to two other aspects or elements of the physical nature of Jesus: the Holy Face and the Holy Name. Of the latter, he wrote:

Honouring the name of Jesus means Jesus known, Jesus loved, Jesus given his proper place, Jesus penetrating into the lives of Christians, especially priests. (…) This is why Jesus the Priest has seemed so divinely beautiful to us, has revealed himself to our souls in such a splendid light and has attracted us with such irresistible traits. Yes, the name of Jesus must be the object amongst us of an exceptional cult. His name is he! To name him is to love him! (…) (Chrétien 2001: 73-4)¹⁹

Upon a closer read, the text comes across as an elegiac tribute to a beloved. In naming, one knows and becomes known, and one also affirms one’s love and devotion. Simply saying the name is sufficient in itself to bring the beloved to mind, to make him present, if not in body, at least in spirit: “His name is he! To name him is to love him!” Eugène Prévost’s writings about the Holy Face are similarly effusive. This particular devotion, inspired by the example of the immensely popular St. Thérèse de Lisieux (of the Infant Jesus and of the Holy Face), is revealing.²⁰ Once again, it manifests Prévost’s abiding psychological and spiritual need to be seduced and overtaken by what he calls,
interestingly enough, the “irresistible traits” of the supreme and holiest victim of all victims, for the Holy Face is the same as that which is believed to be the image of the man Jesus, bleeding and crowned with thorns, of the Shroud of Turin.

In sum, Prévost possessed a rich spirituality centred on the holy body of Jesus and its component parts, and also one not entirely out of step with the religious tenor of his times. Nor was its overt sentimentality misplaced. Tridentine Catholicism put great emphasis on devotion to the various body parts of Jesus (heart, wounds and blood), and it was quite commonplace, as mentioned earlier, for such devotions to be expressed through public venues such as feast days, novenas, processions or formal parish celebrations, or even in the founding of religious orders devoted to their cult. Relics, for example, held place of honour, as did statues, holy images and other Catholic sacramentals. In a culture that generally held to a romanticized ideal of the priesthood, where these semi-sacred males wielded remarkable power and influence (though it is important to note that this was not always and everywhere the case), and where religion was above all a matter of “right belief and practice,” the melodramatic and the spiritually intimate always fluttered seductively beneath the surface of the everyday. Jesus, Mary and Joseph were indeed real people who could and would help one lead a good Catholic life. The saints and angels always stood ready to inspire, intervene, guide and protect. If necessary, Holy Mother Church rescued us from our weaknesses. As with other religious personages, priests, as human as they may have been, also merited absolute and unconditional obeisance and reverence, for their consecrated bodies mirrored that one holy body—broken, ailing and suffering—of Jesus, the high priest. In fact, they were the only ones capable of bringing this divine body into the here-and-now.
A Sexualized, Homoerotic Mystical Discourse

The greatest mystics have always used the language of the erotic to describe their unique relationship with the sacred. For humans, the sexual act signifies the most perfect form of union through intimacy, so why not use its language when speaking of a similar experience of merging with the absolute? In the Roman Catholic tradition, the prodigious Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila—and her androgynous entrails-piercing angel—stands as one of the better known examples of this form of sexualized mystical discourse. Her considerable writings overflow with richly eroticized readings of the Christian mystical experience. Even Eugène Prévost wrote about being penetrated by Jesus “in the most intimate part of my being,” and he uses imagery of “annihilation” and “being possessed” to emphasize the overwhelming physicality of this experience, as though Jesus had actually entered his body to consummate their union as priests. Though comparisons between these two individuals should not be overstated, it is quite remarkable how each could only write about their moment of divine insight in terms which point unmistakably to human erotic hunger.

Eugène Prévost wrote a great deal, particularly in his latter years when he saw this as a form of ministry for which he was particularly well suited. He wrote about all sorts of spiritual themes—his favourites being, as one might expect, the Eucharist, priests, and the person of Jesus in its multiple virtues or manifestations. Very often, these were short pious texts, more in the form of little flyers. Two things stand out about his writings. The first has to do with their content. Apart from those dealing with the routine business of his religious groups (and he could often be very precise and meddling in his requests and instructions), they were almost always about his love for Jesus, or Jesus’ love for
him, and how the two had allowed him to do what he did. The words and images used to express this love were very often romantic, almost gushy. In a significant way, these texts served the purpose of continuously shoring up his authority as founder and superior general of his groups. The second major characteristic of Prévost’s writings is their tone, which is sentimental, theatrical, flamboyant and remarkably familiar. Allowance must be made for a certain nineteenth-century stylistic and literary standard to which he would have subscribed, characterized by flowery expressions and an unctuous resonance. This tone rings rather strangely to modern ears.

In his remarkably candid analysis of Father Prévost’s personality, Georges Perreault discusses these writings, and he attributes the excessive reaffirmations of Jesus’ love for Prévost which they contain to be the manifestation of a process of projection on the part of the founder. He felt unloved; he needed to be attractive and desired. Who better to reassure him than the model of the perfect priest? Perreault also addresses the stylistic character of these writings. He calls the genre of such writings “pseudo-mystical,” acknowledging that they occasionally appear in the spiritual tradition of the Catholic Church. He highlights four of their inherent features: first, their prolixity (the words of Jesus go into great detail about the daily lives and actions of the persons being addressed; a kind of gossipy quality); second, their tone of intimacy (Jesus reveals confidences, often with insistence, that the person her- or himself would not even dare think about); third, their repetitiveness (the themes are often cyclical, and nothing new is advanced, as would normally be the case in a conversation); and fourth, there is a radical disjunction between the tone and content of Jesus’ words in these private revelations and those found, for example, in the gospels. Though they may well be highly literate texts,
Perreault argues that the writings of Eugène Prévost exemplify a pseudo-mystical current in Catholic devotional life often at odds with ecclesiastical legitimacy and orthodoxy, and which has always been suspect because of its reliance on the primacy and authority of private revelation. (1999: 525-35).

Eugène Prévost is never explicitly sexual in his writings. One would not really expect him to be. As with much else when it comes to religious belief, however, there is the spoken and the unspoken, the written and the hinted at, the theologically correct and the spiritually ecstatic, the permitted and the secretly longed for. There is the distant Jesus in the host, and the intimate Jesus ever victimized in the life of the priest; the Jesus of longed-for pain, and the Jesus of languid delight and love. Above all, there is Jesus the male, the Jesus of desire. Though one must be cautious about reading same-sex desire uncritically into the life and writings of Prévost, one can also not turn a blind eye to the hints, images and language which are there, particularly in the texts. Eugène Prévost was a man torn at many different levels: in his vocation, his relations to authority, his mission, his own priesthood. Why would he not be in his sexuality?

Perreault places ambiguity at the very core of Eugène Prévost’s personality. Such ambivalence was never fully resolved; it circumscribed the flow and tension of opposing energies throughout his lifetime. A pivotal part of this ambiguity was the manner in which he chose to define and to describe his relationship with Jesus, a relationship which was embodied in the central leitmotif of his spirituality: that of Jesus, priest and victim. Perreault argues that this was an attempt to fuse the opposing pulls of the profane and the holy in Prévost’s own life—a pull evident in his apparent and sudden “conversion” at the age of seventeen—by transferring them onto the person of Jesus, and thereby achieving a
certain measure of positive resolution. (1999: 522-25) This is not an uncommon use of the dynamics of the devotional life in religion. In the Christian tradition, for example, saints can at times become vectors, in remarkably physical and intimate ways, for many such projections. Robert Orsi speaks of how such holy personages, by virtue of bridging the material and sacred realms, become truly living beings for the devotee, and are understood to be deliberately active in human affairs. As legitimate social actors, they harness and actually embody the sacred. (2005)

Jesus never ceases speaking to Father Prévost, and he invariably speaks of love. It is a love overflowing with the force and vigour of incandescent bodily fluids and fiery spiritual ravages. This is from a text written around the time of his 1877 ordination:

You have plunged me into you; you have inundated and enfolded me with love. You have become for me an ocean of fire, an abyss of love; you have hallowed out my heart, and you have encrusted yourself in it. You have flowed forth into my soul, and you have flowed me into You. I have become a braised coal, which love revives and which love destroys. My soul has been liquefied in You; you have penetrated it, and it has evaporated itself in you; and there remains nothing but a burning dot lost in the ocean of your love. (Hamelin 1999: 66, emphases mine).  

Some days later, in a fitting mood of exhaustion, he wrote the following words in his personal journal:

My entire being has passed into God, but in a frightfully narrow union. (…) The very fact of his Presence is so powerful, that I can
no longer live or act; but it is he who lives, who acts in me. (…) I die, consumed by an interior fire of a mysterious ardour. This act of Jesus is too strong for me to bear with for very long. O my God, I can no longer live, if you do not stop devouring me with such ardour.

(Chrétien 2001: 42-3)²⁵

The physicality of the imagery that Prévost uses in describing these moments of intense union with God is formidable. The words are lusty, couched as they are in the language of physical union and intimacy. God (or Jesus) actually flows into him, filling him with a burning substance—like the churning liquid of an erupting volcano, or the release of an orgasmic urge. These are clearly words of willing submission, but also ones, I would suggest, of same-sex longing. The imagery of fire and bodily intercourse has long been used to describe the vivid intensity of being possessed by, or merging with, the sacred force. In the case of female mystics, such language becomes automatically equated with erotic fusion, because this is what is heterosexually normative. When it comes to male union with the sacred, however, especially when this sacred is understood either in explicitly masculine terms or the actual body of Jesus is involved, the imagery becomes suddenly highly problematic or suspect. When the devotee is a male, he places himself in a typically feminized position vis-à-vis the sacred. This can give rise to a form of heterosexual panic, where the male devotee has to reconcile his gender normativity—his fundamental sense of self—with his spiritual experience. Homoerotic desire such as Prévost’s—sublimated or not, conscious or not—warrants serious consideration. In line with a queer approach to the study of religion, we must learn to read beyond and beneath the obvious, but we must also not be dismissive or prudish about same-sex desire when it
arises in spiritual texts. In fact, the reverse is very often the case. Theorists of religion appear quite willing to accept or tolerate a heteronormative perspective on eroticism and mysticism (in fact, on religion generally), but then become suspicious or dismissive when same-sex desire is involved, as though this were beyond the pale of legitimate human (and therefore, religious) expression.\textsuperscript{26}

The figure of Jesus as ravaging lover is not an especially unusual one in the Christian mystical tradition. Very often, however, it will be stripped of its “dangerous” erotic content, and “spiritualized” to the point of non-recognition, convinced as the theological moralists are as to its indecent overtones.\textsuperscript{27} In the case of Eugène Prévost, what becomes particularly fascinating is not so much the content of the texts—there is a certain familiarity to them as spiritual writings—but rather the uncommon manner in which the unconscious longing to serve the person of Jesus, to be annihilated in him (all this expressed in words of intense personal rapture) becomes his very life’s work: the founding of religious congregations dedicated exclusively to the intimate care of men who are incarnations, as it were, of Jesus, the original lover. No doubt, one could trace an element of positive transference in this process: the channelling of suspect and highly ambivalent homoerotic feelings into a Church-sanctioned project of religious foundation. This is certainly not meant to deny the merit of the work, but rather to point to another way of understanding and appreciating its original spiritual impetus. As William James reminds us, the sudden emergence of long-dormant religious inspiration from the subconscious—the conversion experience—whatever its origin or form, does not, in any way, negate the intervention of some divine force. (1983: 171-224) Eugène Prévost no doubt genuinely believed that Jesus had called him to a life of self-abnegation in the
service of priests; that it was good and necessary that he do this. This may have helped
him make sense of his hidden longings. If his thoughts and burning feelings about Jesus
the Priest, as expressed in his writings, are any indication, then his unconditional love for
priests was but a means to an end: the satisfaction of dormant, unspoken passion.

The life-long ambition of Eugène Prévost was to become a saint, a resolution he
took at the age of seventeen when he decided suddenly to reorder his apparently dissolute
and rebellious life. He decided the best path to this end was to empty himself as a self-
immolated sacrifice to Jesus in the guise of the all-too-human priest. In November 1922,
from his position as superior general of the Fraternité Sacerdotale, he wrote the following
words to a member of his religious order:

Your happiness and your ambition must be constantly to place yourself
at his feet and to deliver yourself completely to his desires. Allow him to
give you whatever he wishes in return. Be assured, however, that it will
always be a part of himself. (…) Therefore, what you must desire and
demand above all else is love. If you love, you will become saints. If
you do not love, you are “pickles,” and non-marinated at that… (Chrétien
2001: 146-47)28

The text is interestingly ambivalent. Does the “him” refer solely to Jesus, as no
doubt seems to be the case, or can it also serve as an allusion to some other priest or
group of priests? Implied in the passage is the question: to whose desires should this
member of the Fraternité deliver himself? Does it, in fact, really matter, since Jesus and
the priest are ultimately one and the same? One is also not quite sure what to make of the
pickle imagery. Perhaps Freud would have had some particularly revealing insight.
Regardless, the virtue of the marinated pickle has to do with its soaking at some length in spices and vinegar, a potently sadistic and sour mixture which transforms it into a delicacy: the pickle as victim. How fitting that a man such as Father Eugène Prévost, religious founder, whose entire life was one of service to other men, should pen such remarkably revealing words.

It is possible that Eugène Prévost may not have been homosexual. But then again, he may well have been. Both options are viable. Beyond the unresolved question of his sexual or emotional preference, however, stands the far more interesting one of the ethos or grounding of his life’s work. In his copious writings and the unique sort of theology which flows from them, one gets a vivid sense of a genuine and deeply religious man haunted by, and grappling with, sublimated same-sex yearnings. This does not lessen the worth of his special charisma in the Catholic Church. It may, in fact, render it all that more nuanced, and ultimately that much richer.

NOTES

1 In order to maintain the flow of the text, I have translated the French passages. All English translations are mine. The original French text is as follows: « Pendant la messe de communauté, Jésus me fit entendre des paroles tellement fortes et tellement sensibles que tout mon être en fut comme enveloppé. « Je viens prendre possession de toi, me dit Jésus; tu m’appartiens. » Ces dernières paroles surtout furent comme un coup de foudre; j’ai rarement senti si intimement l’action de Jésus. J’étais ravi en Lui, enveloppé dans un manteau de feu. Jamais Jésus ne me fit sentir aussi sensiblement sa Présence. Je sentis visiblement qu’il s’emparait de moi, que j’étais dans son entière
possession, qu’il me pénétrait jusque dans le plus intime de mon être, qu’il me possédait d’une manière ineffable, que j’étais anéanti en Lui, et que Lui seul vivait en moi. »

2 Original French text as follows: « Je veux prendre en toi mes complaisances. (…) Mon enfant, je mets en toi mes complaisances. Je me plais en toi. (…) Je t’aime. »

3 This article draws its sources from the book by well-known Québec historian Jean Hamelin on the life of Eugène Prévost. This text was officially commissioned by the Fraternité Sacredotale as part of the Vatican requirements for entering Prévost’s case for beatification. It is not, however, a hagiographic text, but rather a solid and very thorough work of historical research. Part of the book includes an incisive psychological profile of Prévost’s personality by Dominican priest and psychologist Georges Perreault. I have also used the small collection of Prévost’s sayings and textual excerpts edited by Marielle Chrétien, an Oblate of Bethany.


5 The Sulpicians, who played a central role in the development of Montréal, are a French religious order dedicated to the education of priests. Their ideal no doubt exerted some influence on Eugène Prévost’s concept of the priesthood. On the Sulpicians in Montréal, see Dominique Deslandres, John A. Dickinson, Ollivier Hubert, eds., Les

6. Prévost seems to have had a rather ambivalent relationship to authority. On the one hand, he did not get along with his superiors in the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament; they did not consider him submissive and obedient enough. On the other, he was quite authoritarian in the administration of his own religious orders. He expected total and blind obedience. As well, for someone who was most insistent on seeing himself as a “victim” in the care of other priests, he appeared quite capable of holding his own with male members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is another element of his intriguing and paradoxical personality.

7. This is not meant as some hagiographic implication of divine intervention or favour—an inappropriate assumption in any case—but rather as an acknowledgement of the human worth and merit of the work engaged in by religious leaders. Prévost sensed a religious need, and he responded to it. In fact, his were the first Catholic religious orders dedicated specifically to helping priests in difficulty.

8. Bridal imagery is a staple of Christian theology. Beginning with that found in the scriptures (the Song of Songs or the letters of Paul), the relationship between Christ and his church, or between Christ and the individual devotee, is often described as that of bride to bridegroom, with Christ playing the role of bridegroom. Some female mystics—for example, Catherine of Sienna or Julian of Norwich—use this imagery in their own writings. Male theologians, such as some of the more eminent Church Fathers, are far
more notorious in their adoption of such marital imagery. There is, of course, a strong heteronormative quality to this theological matrimonial metaphor.

On the matter of Prévost’s relationship with his sister Ninette and their eventual parting of ways, Georges Perreault (537-40) refers to it as an example of Prévost’s emotional fragility (“fragilité affective”). No suggestion is made here of any sort of incestuous dynamic, however displaced or sublimated, though it does linger in the background. I would agree that this was a particularly intense, significant and ultimately formative sibling relationship for Prévost, one that perhaps highlighted his emotional weaknesses more than anything else. However, such an important primary relationship does not, I would argue, negate potential same-sex longings. It may, in fact, point to the inherently polymorphous quality of human desire, as queer theory maintains.

9 The role of the Catholic Church in the history of Québec has long been a source of debate among historians. In the 1960s and 1970s, as part of an overly negative reactive response, Catholicism was generally and mistakenly understood as having contributed to the “retard” or backwardness of Québec society. Similarly, the role and influence of the ultramontanist ideology as a “totalizing” force has come under critical revision. More contemporary historians adopt a far more nuanced and positive perspective. As a good example of this viewpoint, see Michael Gauvreau, The Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, 1931-1970. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005.

10 See the interesting article by Ollivier Hubert, “Ritualité ultramontaine et pouvoir pastoral clérical dans le Québec de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle,” in Jean-Marie Fecteau and Janice Harvey, eds. La régulation sociale entre l’acteur et l’institution: pour
une problématique historique de l’interaction/Agency and Institutions in Social Regulation: Toward an Historical Understanding of Their Interaction. Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2005, 435-47. Hubert makes an eloquent case for viewing ultramontanism as an occasion for the display, consolidation and legitimatization of clerical power. On Tridentine Catholicism, see John W. O’Malley, Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. It is important to note that the vast majority of the reforms initiated by the Council of Trent had to do with the clergy, both bishops and priests—their theological and dogmatic education, their spiritual development, and their behaviour. As such, the Council contributed quite significantly to a re-valuation of the meaning and role of the priesthood in Catholic culture. Father Eugène Prévost was part of this culture, and the Tridentine view of priests as particularly “sacred and mystical” beings would no doubt have held special meaning for him.


12 Original French text as follows: « (...) rien ne me fait plus souffrir que cet amour pour les Prêtres. C’est à l’état presque de passion chez moi (...). Parler à un Prêtre, parler d’un Prêtre, écrire à un Prêtre, penser à un Prêtre, cela m’enflamme, et ce seul nom de Prêtre produit sur mon âme un effet magique (...). Je ne puis séparer l’idée du Prêtre de l’idée de l’Eucharistie. »

13 Original French text as follows: « Je sens Jésus qui m’appelle, je vois ses chers Prêtres qui m’attendent, et déjà je voudrais avoir versé pour eux tout mon sang. Si tu savais comme le Sacerdoce personnifie pour moi Jésus. (...) Ce Jésus qui a captivé mon
cœur ne m’apparaît plus que comme le Prêtre éternel qui multiplie son amour en prolongeant son Sacerdoce dans les âmes des Prêtres. »

14 The question of masochism, particularly as applied in a religious context, is a delicate one. See the psychological profile provided by Georges Perreault, who does not shy from using this clinical language to describe Prévost’s relationships and his often tortured spiritual musings.


16 Several of John of the Cross’ poems can be read as having a homoerotic subtext. As well, Bernard of Clairvaux’s unique devotion to the materiality of Jesus’ body and its individual parts can be seen in a similar vein. This raises the question of whether or not these saints—and by extension, Eugène Prévost—were sometimes viewed with suspicion by their contemporaries because of the same-sex desire implied in their writings. There are no clear historical indications, though this does not mean that readers did not engage with these texts precisely for these reasons. For a more general overview of such questions, see Donald L. Boisvert, Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004.

17 A personal anecdote is relevant. I was a young novice with the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament many years ago. The Oblates of Bethany, Eugène Prévost’s order for women, provided laundry and cooking services for a group of about thirty or so of us in the novitiate community. Feminist critique aside, I was always amazed and at times
uncomfortable with this arrangement. They treated a bunch of eighteen and twenty year-olds as miniature gods. But upon further reflection, this was no doubt in keeping with the wishes of their founder: respect in the service of the material needs of priests and those in the process of becoming so.


19 Original French text as follows: « Le Nom de Jésus honoré, c’est Jésus connu, Jésus aimé, Jésus mis à sa place, Jésus pénétrant dans la vie des chrétiens, et surtout des Prêtres. (...) Voilà pourquoi Jésus Prêtre nous est apparu si divinement beau, s’est révélé à nos âmes dans une lumière si éclatante et nous a attirés par des attrait irrésistibles! Oui, à la base il faut que le nom de Jésus reçoive chez nous un culte exceptionnel. Son nom, c’est lui! Le nommer, c’est l’aimer! (...)»

20 See Claude Langlois, Le poème de septembre: lecture du manuscrit B de Thérèse de Lisieux. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002. St. Thérèse de Lisieux, arguably the most popular of all 20th-century Catholic saints, exerted a great deal of influence on Christian spirituality, including that of Eugène Prévost. In her writings, most notably “Le poème de septembre,” she often refers to her desire to become a victim (she uses that very word) for others out of love for Jesus. She wants to be “consummated” by the fires of divine justice and love.

21 An interesting example of this is the 1861 foundation of a Québec order of contemplative nuns, the Adoratrices du Précieux-Sang (Adorers of the Precious Blood),
who had convents in North America, but also Cuba. I am grateful to one of SR’s referees for pointing this out.


24 Original French text as follows: « Vous m’avez plongé en vous, vous m’avez inondé et enveloppé dans l’amour. Vous m’êtes devenu un océan de feu, un abîme d’amour; vous avez creusé mon cœur et vous vous y êtes incrusté. Vous vous êtes coulé en mon âme, et vous m’avez coulé en Vous. Je suis devenu un charbon embrasé, que l’amour fait vivre et que l’amour anéantit. Mon âme s’est liquéfiée en Vous; vous l’avez toute pénétrée, elle s’est évaporée en Vous, et il n’en est plus resté qu’un point embrasé perdu dans l’océan de votre amour. »

25 Original French text as follows: « Tout mon être est passé en Dieu, mais dans une union effrayamment étroite. (…) L’action de sa seule Présence est tellement puissante, que je ne puis plus vivre ni agir; mais c’est lui qui vit, qui agit en moi. (…) Je me meurs, consumé par un feu intérieur d’une ardeur mystérieuse. Cette action de Jésus est trop forte pour que je puisse la supporter bien longtemps. Ô mon Dieu, je ne puis plus vivre, si vous ne cessez de me dévorer avec tant d’ardeur. »

26 See Björn Kromdorfer’s article as referenced in note 4.

27 This is not meant to be a blanket injunction against all theologians. But it must be remembered that the idea or image of Jesus as a sexual or erotic being has long been a
source of strong discomfort and, at times, outright anger in certain Christian theological circles. Very often, such views are dismissed as blasphemous. Implications of same-sex desire or homoerotic attraction are even more problematic. I would argue that the long-standing ambivalence of Christianity toward sexuality more generally accounts, in large measure, for this often irrational response and condemnation.

28 Original French text as follows: « Votre bonheur et votre ambition doivent être de venir constamment vous déposer à ses pieds et vous livrer tout entier à son bon plaisir. Puis, laissez-le vous donner librement ce qui lui plaira en retour. Soyez sûr que ce sera toujours quelque chose de lui-même. (...) Donc, ce que vous devez désirer et demander par-dessus tout, c’est l’amour. Si vous aimez, vous deviendrez des saints. Si vous n’aimez pas, vous êtes des « cornichons » et encore non marinés… » Chrétien does not provide any context for this excerpt, except to note that it is dated 12 November 1922 from a letter to a “religieux,” presumably someone from the Fraternité Sacerdotale. It is clear that the reference is to Jesus. But I want to suggest another possible reading of this richly ambiguous and suggestive text, a reading more in line with the methodology and insights of queer theory. Since, in Prévost’s mind, Jesus and priests are co-extensive, why might he not also be referring, unconsciously no doubt, to his priests submitting themselves in the service of other priests? The pickle imagery only adds a further note of ribaldry to what is already a “loaded” text.

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