

Articles

# What Flannery Knew

## Catholic Writing for a Critical Age

Paul Elie

Forty-five years ago, Flannery O'Connor went from her home in Georgia to Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., to give a lecture during a festival marking the university's 175th anniversary. As things turned out, it was the last such lecture she gave, and that grim fact lends her remarks a finality she couldn't have fully intended.

In my view, though, that lecture was more a beginning than an ending—and a beginning with special pertinence for American Catholics today. O'Connor spoke at the beginning of an era that is now coming to an end, and by drawing a comparison between the American Catholic culture she represented and the one of our experience, we can make ready for the era that is rushing in on us, in a century that is no longer new.

That is, we can consider our predicament. And our predicament is this: While the conditions for Catholic cultural life, in many respects, have never been better, actual Catholic culture in America is peculiarly hard to identify or speak of with confidence.

We're all familiar with the indicators of American Catholic success. Catholics are better educated than ever. They buy hardcover books, know their way around Europe, and try to send their children to good universities. They are fluent in music, movies, Broadway, feng shui. In many respects, they are the people Flannery O'Connor yearned to have as readers. And yet when we try to identify the culture this people can call its own, we are thrown back onto the question of what "Catholic" culture is.

I am a writer and editor, not a painter or a filmmaker or an architect, so I realize that when I say "Catholic culture,"

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what I have in mind is mainly literary culture, and my usual approach to a question is closer to literary criticism than to the kind of public philosophy that somehow manages to speak of America as both a Christian nation *and* a culture of death.

So I'll take an essentially literary approach here. But it seems to me that the predicament I am describing exists across the disciplines. We yearn for our religious sense of things to find expression in great works of art and literature, and we are frustrated. We are put on the defensive by people who insist that we exhibit such works as proofs of our religious integrity. We feel diminished by the very achievements in our common past that should embolden us. The life and work of a Flannery O'Connor have come to seem a reproach. Our precursor becomes our oppressor, whose genius makes clear what we lack.



Flannery O'Connor in May 1952

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**T**he poet is traditionally a blind man. But the Christian poet, and the storyteller as well, is like the blind man Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees—but walking. Christ touched him again, and he saw clearly. We will not see clearly until Christ touches us in death, but this first touch is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to accept if we want to realize a Catholic literature.”

That’s how O’Connor concluded her lecture, which was on the topic of “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South.” From time to time she ventured forth from Milledgeville to give “these stinking talks”—as she called them—at Catholic colleges around the country, going on “bread-winning expeditions” on her aluminum crutches. Before setting out this time, she told a friend: “I am off Monday for my rounds and will be mighty glad when it’s over. The brandy might be a good idea, but not for me on crutches. I just might over-relax myself.”

She had given this particular lecture several times before. In it she would set the church and the South against each other and then show the qualities they had in common: an acquaintance with the Bible, a religious heritage, an awareness of human limitation, a respect for the concrete and actual, a recognition that “good and evil in every culture tend to be joined at the spine.” A few weeks earlier, Martin Luther King Jr. had concluded the March on Washington with a speech that might have consigned the culture of the South to the dustbin. And yet O’Connor spoke up for the South “in spite of her well-publicized sins.” She spoke of the South as “her” and “she”—an idiom, at once tender and respectful, that Catholics of the era used when they spoke of the church. And she held up the South as an ideal setting for the Catholic writer.

She declared that most Catholic novels were failures, for example, and that the Catholic novel usually fails because it “doesn’t grapple with any particular culture. It may try to make a culture out of the church, but this”—she matter-of-factly explained—“is always a mistake because the church is not a culture.” That is why O’Connor was glad to be from the South. The South was a culture. It had a particular history, a set of “fierce and fading” manners and a distinctive idiom. And it had religion. She explained:

The writer whose themes are religious particularly needs a region where these themes find a response in the life of the people, and this condition is met in the South as nowhere else. A secular society understands the religious mind less and less. It becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable, which is what the novelist has to do.... When you create a character who believes vigorously in Christ, you have to explain his aberration. Here the Southern writer has the greatest possible advantage; he lives in the Bible Belt, where such people, though not as numerous as they used to be, are taken for granted.

**Instead of making Catholic writing, we seek Catholic writers as proof of its continued existence. Instead of understanding our predicament, we look to see who we’ve got.**

If the South, for O’Connor, is always a she, the writer is always a he. And the writer is singular, not plural. “The writer whose themes are religious.” “The Southern writer.” “The writer with Christian preoccupations.” “The Catholic novelist.” Instead of making statements about Catholic writers in general, she put forward an ideal of such a writer, a figure who at once saw things her way and stood apart from her.

She was thirty-eight years old. She was dying of lupus. “Writing a novel is a terrible ordeal, in which the hair falls out and the teeth decay,” she had declared, and she was describing her own experience. She doubtless suspected she might not be around to embody the ideal of the Catholic novelist in America. Because of this circumstance—or in spite of it—she set her sights on a future that she would not see. “There are certain conditions necessary for the emergence of Catholic literature which are found nowhere else in this country in such abundance as in the South,” she remarked, “and I look forward with considerable relish to the day when we are going to have to enlarge our notions about the Catholic novel to include some pretty odd Southern specimens.”

**W**hat would Flannery O’Connor have made of us? Would she have recognized us, and our predicament, in the future that she looked forward to with such relish? Would she have thought that a Catholic literature eventually did emerge in this country—that our writers have made belief believable?

It is hard to say, because she was not around to say for herself. And it is hard to say because, even at the time she spoke, Catholic culture in America was beginning to change. A month after her Georgetown speech, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. In Rome a couple of

weeks after that, the bishops, at the Second Vatican Council, put out two key documents: the *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy* and the *Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication*. And across the West, as Philip Larkin wrote in a poem called "Annus Mirabilis": "Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (Which was rather late for me) / Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / And the Beatles' first LP."

With those occurrences, one era of Catholic culture ended and another began. The Kennedy assassination did away with the notion of Catholic culture in America as rooted in clanish solidarity against an oppressor class—of a people proudly rising up to declare themselves. The two conciliar documents were a matched pair. With the *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*, the bishops authorized the hopes of the liturgical movement to "inculturate" the Mass more fully within the language and other particulars of the surrounding culture. With a stroke, the bishops did away with the most obvious propagator of Catholic culture for a thousand years: the Latin Mass. In doing so, you might say that they got the church out of the culture business. With the *Decree on Social Communication*, the bishops recognized that, more than ever, culture would be transmitted through the mass media—and sought to grapple with the challenges this new dynamic of culture posed. Meanwhile—six thousand and some biblical years after Adam and Eve met under a fig tree in the garden—sex and love were taking on new forms. In a few words Larkin slyly bracketed this development between the demise of the legal cultural authority that had banned D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as obscene and the emergence of the freestyle commercial culture that would spread the Beatles' music worldwide.

So began the present age—an age that is coming to an end.

**W**ould O'Connor have recognized us? We shouldn't dare say. But her work makes clear that she anticipated us. She saw us coming. That is one reason why her work has such power today. "An identity," O'Connor told her audience, "is made not from what passes...but from those qualities that endure because they are related to truth"—not average qualities but those "hidden and most extreme." For that reason, she explained, seeking the true identity of the church, the Catholic novelist



is forced to follow the spirit into strange places and to recognize it in many forms not totally congenial to him. His interests and sympathies may very well go, as I find my own do, directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic and most revealing of a need that only the church can fill.

That is what she did. And yet, by an odd reversal, the things she spoke of as strange are now familiar to many of us, and the things she thought familiar are strange. To the Catholic writer of our age, the church O'Connor describes—which safeguards mystery, which gives the believer eyes to see with—is remote, even unrecognizable. So is the Catholic writer who knows so well what he believes that he doesn't have to think about it and so is free to observe the world around him. So, for all her charm, is O'Connor herself. We call her by her first name, but she is no more familiar to us than Tobit or Tertullian. She is as much a stranger as any of her creations.

Often, the shock of a first encounter with her is the beginning of vision, a fresh encounter with Christian belief and its implications. But it is not the "shock of recognition." That comes from something else—from her account of the world around her. It is her account of the South of 1963 that calls to mind the church of today: a *she* "struggling mightily to maintain her identity against great odds and without knowing always, I believe, where her identity lies"—a community flawed and embattled and yet richer in insight than the surrounding culture in that "we have had our Fall." It is in her description of "the man of our time, the unbeliever, who is nevertheless grappling in a desperate and usually intense way with intense problems of the spirit." For it is with this figure that Catholic writers today identify. They are riven by the tension between "an attraction to the holy and the disbelief in it." They are inadvertent pilgrims, who, as O'Connor put it in a bit of self-description, have to reckon the costs of belief and disbelief every step of the way. Touched by Christ in faith, they have "the beginning of vision"—but only the beginning.

The shock of recognition is found, especially, in her fiction. In a young man whose rejection of the church is complete, except that he can't rid himself of the ragged figure moving from tree to tree in the back of his mind. In a young woman atheist, once upon a time a believer, whose PhD makes her

superior to the folks still foolish enough to believe—and makes her innocent enough to be taken in by them. In a recent college graduate whose education has equipped him to instruct his mother on the difference between charity and justice—and to choose a crowded city bus as the place to do it. In a man who gets the face of Christ tattooed big as life onto his back as if to show the world the damage that Christ has done to him.

These are O'Connor's figures, the Christian *malgré lui*—the Christian in spite of himself. In her age, they were grotesques. In our age, they are our peers—figures we recognize in the church and in the writing about the church. Today, O. E. Parker is the person in the pew next to us, proffering a tattooed hand at the sign of peace. Today, instead of founding a Church of Christ Without Christ and making a “rat-colored car” his pulpit, the admirable nihilist writes a book about the Christ he has trouble believing in.

**I**n short, it is not Flannery O'Connor but the Christian in spite of himself that is the figure for Catholic writers in America in our age, the age that is now coming to an end.

What are we to make of this development? Some would say that the grappings of such people are more authentic, more case-hardened by experience, than the received ideas of the so-called institutional church. Some would say that it is an example of the decadence of the so-called People of God in America, a trend that was reversed beginning on October 16, 1978, with the election of Karol Wojtyła as pope—and that that is the event whose anniversary we should be marking this fall.

I have found it useful to apply an insight made by a critic writing a century before O'Connor, when a different country was going through a sea change in the life of faith. Matthew Arnold, the son of a headmaster, himself an inspector of Protestant schools in England, wrote “Dover Beach,” the much-anthologized poem about “the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the sea of faith. Arnold did most of his work as a critic, and I am interested in the distinction he made between the creative age and the critical age. He saw creative ages as rare. They came about when creative artists found the material of strong ideas current around them. These were put in circulation, and kept there, by critics, who, though creative in a way, sought not to make beautiful works but “to see the object as in itself it really is.”

I think that Catholic culture in the United States has been in a critical age for some time, following the creative age of the middle of the last century, and Catholic writers in this age have also been more critical than creative—more determined to see the object as it really is than to make belief believable.

There are certain advantages to seeing our recent history as a critical age following on a creative one. It gets us away from the usual interpretive schemes of reformation and restoration, of *Concilium* and *Communio*, of this pontificate and that one. It invites a parallel with the crisis of another time

and place, a different sea change in the life of faith. And it seems to me that it helps us see Catholic writers as actors in a history other than our own particular history. Like Hazel Motes and O. E. Parker, these writers have taken their difficulties with Christianity as a starting point for the life of faith. Often enough, it is a difficulty in squaring the past with the present—the church's history with the church's claims. So these writers are as much engaged with our great precursors, and with the creative age just past, as with the present. They work with materials already at hand, using journalism, memoir, essay, narrative history, and historical fiction to make our story fresh and strange.

These writers have a common predicament. They are still surprised that their conscience puts them at odds with the church, because their conscience was formed by the church. The church, the source for their criticism of the culture, is now, often enough, the object of their criticism. These writers envy a writer like Newman, for whom “ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt.” But for them, difficulties do sometimes lead to doubts. Their Catholic convictions tell them that the accounts of life found in the culture are unworthy of the human person. Their worldly experience, and their knowledge of the life of the church, tell them that the church's account of things—its response to revealed truth—is imperfect and still in development. They say always and everywhere that there is more to be said, more to the story.

These writers are often in tension with the church, because, unlike novelists, they are working with the same materials as everybody from newspaper columnists to the Holy Father. And yet their tension with the church obscures the fact that they take the approach they do out of respect. It sometimes seems that any pulp novelist can crack the code of the Christian past and get a bestseller out of it. But these writers work in essay, memoir, narrative history, and the like in a recognition that the church's claims are “related to truth”—in the belief that the gospel, for all its difficulties, is a work of nonfiction.

They have had the experience of worldly success. But there is no worldly advantage for them in being Catholic. On the contrary, Catholic faith is an aspect of experience that they have sought out and developed even though, to many people,

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it doesn't make sense. These writers, even as they go into areas of experience whose outward forms seem initially farthest from the Catholic, have found in those experiences a need that only the church can fill. So they have sought to make Catholicism believable in America by seeing it as it is, not as it ought to be.

Back in Georgia, O'Connor told a friend that she had returned from her trip to the capital "with enough money to float me through the next six or eight months. I get a lot out of it besides money. I see how the other half thinks and I come home raring to write." She wrote a new story that she was "right enthusiastic about." This was "Revelation," in which she drew on the popular imagery of revelation, heard on gospel radio and seen in civil-rights marches on TV, to bring the farm woman Ruby Turpin up to the mountaintop and vouchsafe her a vision of the promised land. Nine months later O'Connor was dead. Her kidneys failed and she was taken to the hospital one last time, and there, on August 2, 1964, she went into a coma, never to recover.

Why do I say that the age I have described—a critical age for Catholic culture in America—is coming to an end? I wish I could say that it is because Catholic writers and artists, having been touched by the work of great precursors like Flannery O'Connor, are now seeing more and more clearly—that we have moved past "the beginning of vision" toward deeper and stranger visions, and that a new creative age has begun.

But I don't think that is the case. The new century is no longer new, but the church and the Catholic writer in America are in arrested development together. Each awaits a set of preconditions that must be met before a new creative age can begin. The church, at its worst, expects a degree of conformity that the critic finds uncongenial or contrary to truth. The critic, at his weakest, mistakes himself for a reformer and expects the church to reorganize according to the prescriptions of his latest article or blog post—and to be grateful to him for showing the way forward.

**W**hom do I have in mind? If I were to make a list of prominent Catholic writers who represent a critical age, it probably wouldn't surprise you. The philosopher Charles Taylor, the most recent winner of the Templeton Prize, would be on it. So would Garry Wills, who applied Shakespeare's image of "bare ruined choirs" to the postconciliar era in America—an era that in retrospect doesn't seem so ruinous after all. So would Eamon Duffy, the historian who—speaking of bare ruined choirs—returned to the original scene of the crime and chronicled the stripping of the altars, and Elizabeth Johnson, the theologian who described God as "She Who Is." So would Andrew Sullivan, the resident-alien American commentator whose Web site declares him to be "of no party or clique." So would Richard Rodriguez, the Californian, whose televised conversation with Bill Moyers made clear, as if it hadn't been clear before, that his three books of memoir form a thousand-page spiritual autobiography.

It is an impressive list—but the Catholic culture's eagerness to boast of "prominent writers" is part of the problem. "Writers merely decorate," Evelyn Waugh wrote in his notorious *Life* piece on American Catholicism in 1949, insisting that the task of the church is to produce saints. He overstated the point, but, with his keen social radar, he identified a trait of American Catholicism that was obvious then and that has stayed with us from that age to this one. Instead of making Catholic writing, we seek Catholic writers as proof of its continued existence. Instead of understanding our predicament, we look to see who we've got.

Flannery O'Connor knew better. She described the "Catholic writer" or "the writer with Christian preoccupations" in a way that at once offered a sideways self-portrait and a character in whom her readers could recognize themselves. Confident that she, in all her strangeness, was in some way a representative figure, she made a likeness of herself—her best self—and put it forth for others to emulate and admire.

The Catholic writer in a critical age has like ambitions. But they probably won't be achieved, because it is too late—because the critical age is coming to an end. And I think that this age is coming to an end because the materials of the American Catholic past—those of the past century, at least—are reaching their expiration date. The church that such a writer is habituated to approaching in a critical spirit scarcely exists.

A century ago in North America, Irish Catholics, Polish Catholics, Italian Catholics, and German Catholics all had their own churches, and defended them like battlements. Fifty years ago, Catholics were hesitant to set foot in a Protestant church, much less marry Christians of the so-called separated brethren. Thirty years ago, it was an article of faith that the pope had to be an Italian—and that the president of a Catholic university had to be a member of the clergy.

Enough has changed that it hardly makes sense to speak of American Catholicism in the time-honored way, as an encounter of the absoluteness of the Catholic faith with American-style openness, democracy, and prosperity. Three recent developments have brought attention to the change. The destruction of the World Trade Center by men devoted to Islam made clear that the question of religion and its place in the world is more vexed than had been acknowledged. The scandal of clergy sexual abuse, and the comportment of the bishops, made clear that institutional self-scrutiny must be not a phase but a spiritual exercise; and when one bishop, in court, characterized his priests as "independent contractors," the phrase seemed to capture a sense of functional distance from the center that is widely felt by both clergy and the laity. Finally, the rapid spread of culture across borders has placed American Catholics in circumstances broader and more various than our familiar notions of culture can explain. In particular, the movement north of people from Mexico and Latin America, many of them Catholic, has made clear that American Catholicism going forward will be more mixed—*mestiza*—than ever.

This is a new age, no less than modernity was. And yet many of us are stuck on the story of the last new age—when sex was invented, the Latin Mass gave way to mass culture, and the clan came apart after a death in the family.

Some people in the church *are* responding to our new circumstances creatively, looking to the future as much as to the past. Catholic readers are seeking out the work of writers like the novelist Marilynne Robinson, recognizing that she and we, though separated by doctrine and custom, belong to the same tradition. Groups like the Community of Sant'Egidio are enacting the gospel in Africa and Asia in ways the missionaries of old never dreamed of. We are hungry for “cross border” encounters—so hungry that, as O'Connor wrote of a character in a story, we could eat all the loaves and fishes, after they were multiplied.

The genius of Flannery O'Connor was that she left many of the cultural distinctions cherished by Catholics of her age out of her work, recognizing that they were not related to truth. Instead, she made work that crossed borders—between North and South, black and white, Catholic and Protestant, the realistic and the grotesque—in order to dramatize the central human question: the question of “the salvation or loss of the soul,” as she put it. Her work will make sense when the “Protestant South” is the territory of Central and South America. It will make sense when the admirable nihilist, the practitioner of a do-it-yourself Christianity, is an

oilworker on a derrick in Nigeria or a “house Christian” in Beijing. It will make sense because she looked forward, not back—looked forward imaginatively through the “realism of distances,” another term for prophecy.

**A**bout the Catholic writing of our own age I am less sure. Arnold saw the critical age as preceding the creative one, with critics making straight the paths for writers and artists by putting crucial ideas in circulation. The Catholic writers of the age now ending have done this, at least.

Meanwhile, the official emphasis on the inalterable character of certain teachings and practices has had a strange effect: in closing down the discussion of those areas of experience, it has opened up the discussion of a much larger one—the whole question of the existence of God and whether, not how, God is made known to us. That is a question that can never be considered settled. It is the question that Flannery O'Connor, in her way, made dramatic; and, it seems to me, it is the question that Catholic writers of the coming age will have to dramatize in new ways. Whether this age will be a new creative age or something else, I wouldn't venture to say. But if Catholic writers in the time ahead are going to face down the question in the fullness of anguish, and not just keep it in circulation, we are going to have to turn to the imagination. ■

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