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The Franciscan Legionnaire

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FLANNERY O'CONNOR AT LOURDES

American literature has had its share of interesting authors, none more so than Flannery O'Connor. She died young, and her published works consist of only two novels and a score of short stories, yet in this relatively few number of pages are found some of the most strangely captivating characters a reader could ever run into. No one who has ever read "A Good Man is Hard to Find," even if it was only once and ages ago in some university American Lit survey course, has ever forgotten the Grandmother and the Misfit and their encounter at the story's end. To have read her first novel, *Wise Blood*, means that you now have, as companions on your own life's journey, Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery, for no one emerges from a reading of that book with a less than indelible impression on the memory of the founder and lone member of the Church Without Christ, and the utterly loopy zoo guard who inherited his daddy's wise blood.

A Georgia Roman Catholic, O'Connor usually bristled at being called "a Catholic writer" or "a Southern writer." She readily affirmed that her Catholic faith helped her to see what in life was important, and taught her most of what she knew about what she saw, and yet specifically Catholic practices and traditions are rarely seen in her fiction. Virtually everything she wrote was set in the American South, and she firmly believed that the South offered its sons and daughters who were writers certain definite advantages that were not to be found in other regions, but ultimately this was an accident of birth which, once accepted, became not at all a

limiting factor but, like her Catholic faith, a liberating one. The writer, she said, must write the things that he can make live, and what she could make alive were both the ordinary and the odd types found in the South: dairy farm widows and their hired help, backwoods prophets and Bible salesmen, farm boys transplanted to the city and overly educated wannabe intellectuals. She once joked that if she were to set one of her stories in Japan all the characters would end up sounding like Senator Herman Talmadge, and she wrote to a friend, "I am interested in the old Adam. He talks southern because I do."

She was born in 1925 and was dead in 1964, dying at thirty-nine of the same disease that had killed her father when she was just a girl. Early in 1958, the year of her trip to Europe and Lourdes, she wrote to Maryat Lee: *You didn't know I had a DREAD DISEASE didja? Well I got one. My father died of the same stuff at the age of 44 but the scientists hope to keep me here until I am 96. I owe my existence and cheerful countenance to the pituitary glands of thousands of pigs butchered daily in Chicago Illinois at the Armour packing plant. If pigs wore garments I wouldn't be worthy to kiss the hems of them. They have been supporting my presence in this world for the last seven years... The name of my dread disease is Lupus Erythematosus, or as we literary people prefer to call it, Red Wolf.* [She called herself "an innocent speller" and all the words in italics are as she wrote them.]

Systemic lupus is an auto-immune disorder, and in the 50's part of the treatment was the

heavy use of steroidal anti-inflammatory medication. A side effect of these drugs is that the bones lose their calcium and become softer. In O'Connor's case, it was her hips that were most affected, and as walking became more painful her doctors ordered her to use first a cane and then, in the fall of 1955, crutches.

Enter Cousin Katie, as if she had ever really left the stage of the drama of Flannery's life. Katie, well into her eighties by now, lived in Savannah, where Flannery was born and had spent the first dozen years of her life. Indeed, the O'Connors lived next door to Katie until the family moved, first to Atlanta in 1938 and then to Milledgeville in the following year. In late October 1957 Katie made an offer to Flannery and her mother – Flannery lived with her mother from 1951 until her death – an offer that they could not refuse. As she tells it in a letter:

The latest turn of events around here is that my cousin in Savannah insists that my mother and I go on that diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes and Rome that Msgr. McNamara is conducting next spring. In addition to insisting upon it, she wishes to give us the trip—which is the basis of her insistence... As this is about the only way either of us will ever get there, my mother is all for it. I am all for it too though I expect it to be a comic nightmare. It only lasts 17 days so I figure I should be able to stand it that long. What I see is a planeload of fortress-footed female Catholics pushed from shrine to shrine by the prelates McNamara and Bourke... I guess the way to stand it will be to indulge temporarily in Quietism, cut my motor off so to speak and be towed.

A month later Flannery wrote to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. She had known the Fitzgeralds for nearly ten years; she had lived at their Connecticut home for two years, and was godmother to one of their children. They were now

living in Italy, and Flannery hoped that they could be reunited, perhaps in Rome. And then she added, *If you haven't been to Lourdes yet, how come you don't meet us there? The geography is beyond me, of course.* Over the next few months, the "comic nightmare" quality that she expected to characterize the trip seemed to be anticipating itself as the trip became an on-again off-again affair. Her doctors said she couldn't go, as the itinerary was well beyond what her

body could handle. Katie would not take No for an answer, and worked the travel agent to change the itinerary for Flannery and her mother so that they would visit fewer places and spend fewer hours in transit. The doctors reconsidered and allowed it. Throughout all this, Flannery continued to hope not only that she would be able to meet up with the Fitzgeralds, but that Sally at

least would be able to be with them at Lourdes. These two women knew each other quite well, and it is hard to believe that Flannery did not know that Sally at Lourdes would be the undoing of her avowed purpose to *not* seek a cure for her physical ailments in the waters of the shrine:

About the Lourdes business. I am going as a pilgrim, not a patient. I will not be taking any bath. I am one of those people who could die for his religion easier than take a bath for it... If there were any danger of my having to take one, I would not go. I don't think I'd mind washing in somebody else's blood... but the lack of privacy would be what I couldn't stand. This is neither right nor holy of me, but it is what is.

Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn't. Her revulsion at the lack of privacy was no doubt genuine. A year earlier, with no trip to Lourdes on the horizon, she wrote to a friend who had just returned from Japan, where she (the friend) had followed the Japanese practice of bathing:

Greetings from historic Milledgeville where the ladies and gents wash in separate tubs. Are you sure you haven't caught anything; what I

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*—Letter to Betty Hester
14 December 1957*

mean is, the blood disease and all, what I mean is there are certain advantages to being stiff-necked? Unadaptability is often a virtue. If I were in Japan, I would be pretty high by the time I left out of there as I wouldn't have washed during the trip. My standard is: when in Rome, do as you done in Milledgeville.

So this lady was not about to do any communal bathing, not in Japan and not in France. And yet this seems to be only a part, and not the greater part, of her resolve to avoid the waters of Lourdes. Sally Fitzgerald, long after it was all over, wrote of her friend, "She dreaded the possibility of cure in those circumstances." Like so much of what O'Connor herself wrote into her fiction, this sounds shocking. How could she not want a cure for her lupus or stronger bones or freedom from the crutches, however and whenever that cure might come? Fitzgerald does not say what lay behind O'Connor's dread, and if Flannery wrote anything of her feelings about a possible cure, it has not been published. The tone and texture of her letters suggest that it was not out of scorn or contempt that she feared to be cured. She did not hesitate to employ her acerbic wit in the description of what happened at Lourdes, yet her anxiety seems to have more to do with humility than pride. A miraculous cure would have been a grace, and perhaps she doubted that she had it in her to accept and endure such a gift. So why did she end up taking the plunge? Here is her explanation:

No credit is owing to me for taking the bath at Lourdes. Sally went along with us and she was determined that I take it and gave me no peace. She made the arrangements. If she hadn't been there, the arrangements wouldn't have been made. She has a hyper-thyroid moral imagination. If I hadn't taken it she said it would have been a failure to cooperate with grace and me, seeing myself plagued in the future by a bad conscience, took it. Nobody I am sure prays in that water.

So Sally made her do it? That's it? Not quite. Fitzgerald's comment on O'Connor's words is quite revealing: "I did make her do it, not because of an overheated moral imagination, but because I was sure she would later feel she had

disappointed her elderly cousin. She knew I would insist, and that was perhaps the reason she so much wanted me to come along. She dreaded the possibility of cure in those circumstances; I didn't think she had to worry. She was annoyed, briefly, but her irritation faded."

Several weeks after returning to Milledgeville, O'Connor sent to Elizabeth Bishop this account of her experience at the shrine:

Lourdes was not as bad as I expected it to be... Somebody in Paris told me the miracle at Lourdes is that there are no epidemics and I found this to be the truth. Apparently nobody catches anything. The water in the baths is changed once a day, regardless of how many people get into it. I went early in the morning and it was clean; sat in a long line of peasants to wait for my turn. They passed around a thermos bottle of Lourdes water and everybody had a drink out of the top. I had a nasty cold so I figured I left more germs than I took away. The sack you take the bath in is the same one the person before you took off, regardless of what ailed him. At least there are no society trappings along with the medieval hygiene. I saw nothing but peasants and was very conscious of the distinct odor of the crowd. The supernatural is a fact there but it displaces nothing natural; except maybe those germs.

Sally was right, and Flannery left the grotto as she had come in, on her crutches. Six months later she wrote a friend: *Our cousin who gave us the trip to Lourdes is dying in Savannah but before she lost consciousness she had the happiness of knowing that the trip to Lourdes has effected some improvement in my bones. Before we went they told me I would never be off the crutches. Since last week I am being allowed to walk around the house without them as the bone is beginning to recalcify.* A month later, to another friend, she wrote of the novel she had struggled with for over six years: *Three or four more pages and I'll have a first draft. This is a very good feeling I can tell you after so many years. Of course now I have to go back to the beginning. I'm by no means finished but at least I know that it's possible. I must say I attribute this to Lourdes more than the recalcifying bone.*

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00_____ Family, \$100.00_____ (*Immediate family, parents and children*)