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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Among the qualities that join to make for an artistic imagination, one of the more important is the ability to see how events and decisions make themselves felt well beyond the immediate moment and setting in which they occur. Every word, every action has its effects, and some of these can be subtle and quiet, reaching down through the generations. When a writer or an artist points them out for us, the result can be delightful and more than delightful.

The American writer Flannery O'Connor had a knack for seeing connections and tracing consequences that is unnerving in her stories and novels, and uncanny in her dealings with other people. One of the most interesting sections in the Library of America edition of her *Collected Works* is the nearly four hundred pages of letters, many of which reveal an eye for the less than obvious detail and an ear for the unspoken word whose importance outweighs what had actually been said or written. Perhaps the best example of this imagination at work, however, is found in the story of her interaction with a group of nuns in Atlanta and in her reflections on the episode afterwards. The incident is told in *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, written in late 1960.

In the spring of 1959, some five years before her death at age thirty-nine, O'Connor received a letter from Sister Evangelist, the superior of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta. The letter was a request that O'Connor write the story of a young girl who had grown up in the home and who had recently died. Mary Ann was born with cancer, a large tumor on the side of her face. She had not been

expected to live long, but she survived her infancy and the surgical removal of an eye, and at the age of three she was brought to the Sisters at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. She lived for nine more years and, as Sr. Evangelist told it, "She proved to be a remarkable child... Patients, visitors, Sisters, all were influenced in some way by this afflicted child. Yet one never thought of her as afflicted... after one meeting one never was conscious of her physical defect but recognized only the beautiful brave spirit and felt the joy of such contact." With the letter, the nun had enclosed a photograph of the young girl on her First Communion day.

Sr. Evangelist was looking for a good writer to make something good out of Mary Ann's story, and Flannery O'Connor was the obvious choice. Milledgeville, where O'Connor made her home, was close to Atlanta, and O'Connor was a serious and devout Catholic. The nun knew that O'Connor was a fiction writer, but she did not consider that to be a problem. "...we don't want a pious little recital. We want a story with a real impact on other lives just as Mary Ann herself had that impact on each life she touched... This wouldn't have to be a factual story. It could be a novel with many other characters but the outstanding character, Mary Ann." The letter ended with an invitation to O'Connor to come to Atlanta and to visit the cancer home, the better "to imbibe the atmosphere" of the place that had been Mary Ann's home for nine years.

O'Connor's immediate reaction was that this was probably a hopeless project and certainly a project that she did not want to get involved in

personally. "It is always difficult to get across to people who are not professional writers that a talent to write does not mean a talent to write anything at all. I did not want to imbibe Mary Ann's atmosphere. I was not capable of writing her story." But she stared at the photograph for some time, and when she got up, it was to go to her bookcase for a volume of stories by one of her own favorite writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The nuns who ran Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Atlanta belonged to an order that is popularly called "the Hawthorne Dominicans." With the formal name of the Servants of Relief for Incurable Cancer, the congregation had been founded and organized under the rule of the Third Order Dominicans by Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, the second daughter of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne. O'Connor knew Hawthorne's life and work very well, and so she knew of Rose, who had written a memoir of her father a few years before her conversion to the Catholic Church in 1891. Several years after her conversion, she began her work in New York with cancer sufferers. From that work came the religious order to continue it and, eventually, the home in Atlanta that had been a home to Mary Ann for the last nine years of her short life.

The specific story that O'Connor was looking for was "Our Old Home," which relates the visit of a fastidious gentleman to a poorhouse in Liverpool, England. During the visit, an ugly, sickly child takes a fancy to the man and follows him around on the tour, finally planting himself right in front of the gentleman and raising his arms, wanting to be picked up. The man paused, then lifted the child up in his arms. The story's narrator then goes on:

Nevertheless, it could be no easy thing for him to do, he being a person burdened with more than an Englishman's customary reserve, shy of actual contact with human beings, af-

flicted with a peculiar distaste for whatever was ugly, and furthermore, accustomed to that habit of observation from an insulated standpoint which is said (but I hope erroneously) to have the tendency of putting ice into the blood.

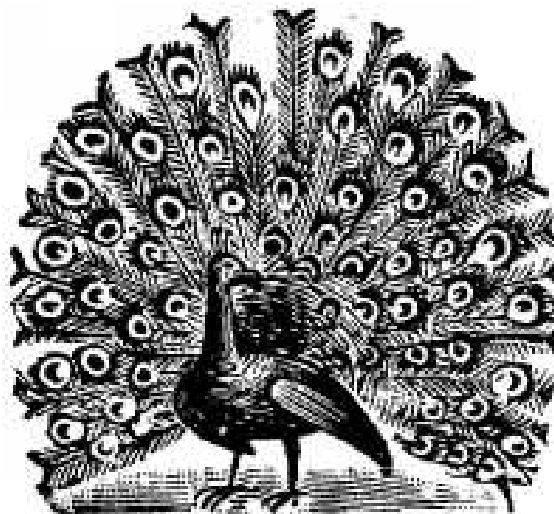
So I watched the struggle in his mind with a good deal of interest, and am seriously of the opinion that he did a heroic act and effected more than he dreamed of toward his final salvation when he took up the loathsome child and caressed it as tenderly as if he had been its father.

The English gentleman in the story was Hawthorne, or at least a part of him. Years after the author's death, his widow published his notebooks in which there is an account of an incident that took place while the family was living in England which reads very much like

the story just cited. Still later, his daughter Rose, in her memoir of her father, stated that this account of the Liverpool workhouse event contained the greatest words her father ever wrote.

What can a father give to his daughter? What did Nathaniel leave to Rose? In O'Connor's view, he left her precisely what he pointed to in the story, even if he expressed it there in a necessarily negative way.

But then, if you know what a man is afraid of, you also know what he values and prizes. All writers are necessarily observers of their fellow human beings, and Hawthorne knew that his own customary position of observation was very much that of "an insulated standpoint," and he worried that he was too much inclined to let this narrative distancing "put ice into the blood." This fear of the cold within is what he gave to her, and she accepted it as her ten talents, from which and with which she made another ten. "The ice in the blood which he feared," O'Connor writes, "and which this very fear preserved him from, was turned by her into a warmth which initiated action. If he observed, fearfully



but truthfully; if he acted, reluctantly but firmly, she charged ahead, secure in the path his truthfulness had outlined for her.”

There is, in O’Connor’s view, a straight line from Liverpool to New York to Atlanta, from Nathaniel to Rose to Mary Ann. A small act of charity by the father left its mark on the daughter. She accepted it, transmitted it, amplified it. A century or so later, and an ocean away, Mary Ann became an heir to that goodness and a bright witness to its power. As St. Paul says in one of his letters, all of life is a kind of training for death. The deepest wisdom is the wisdom that helps us to accept life with joy as the gift that it is, and to surrender it in peace as the offering it must become. Mary Ann lived longer, much longer, than her doctors had expected, and was twelve years old when she died. She was old enough to ask the questions that we all ask about why we live and why we die, and she was old enough to need the consolation of the truth, the comfort of wisdom. Flannery O’Connor firmly believed that the Church established by Christ had been cherishing and deepening that wisdom, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, for nearly two thousand years. The nuns had drunk deeply of it in their prayer, reading, and study, and when Mary Ann showed up at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home, needing some one not just to care for her ravaged body but also to teach her what to make of her brief life and approaching death, they were ready for her.

In “Our Old Home” Hawthorne expressed his conviction that there was a touch of heroism and a breath of salvation in a very ordinary, very small act of kindness. Looking only at the old New Englander himself, we can see that, but looking beyond him, looking as O’Connor would have us look, we can see that Hawthorne on that day in Liverpool was not only the receiver of a grace, but a conduit of grace, a link in a chain of charity that binds times and places together in a wondrous way. The daughter’s love certainly outstripped the father’s, and O’Connor is right to say that “Hawthorne gave what he did not have himself.” Yet it is just as certain that Rose Hawthorne’s life was marked

from an early age by a father who feared ice in his own blood and with that fear paid silent tribute to the beauty of a love he did not possess but could only salute from afar. When her conversion came, it found a waiting infrastructure built up in part by what she took to be the greatest words her father ever wrote, words of what happened to a shy, reserved man, long accustomed to that habit of observation from an insulated standpoint, on a day in a poorhouse when he was confronted by an unlovely child with up-raised arms.

Towards the end of her “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*,” O’Connor writes, “This action by which charity grows invisibly among us, entwining the living and the dead, is called by the Church the Communion of Saints. It is a communion created upon human imperfection, created from what we make of our grotesque state. Of hers Mary Ann made what, like all good things, would have escaped notice had not the Sisters and many others been affected by it and wished it written down.” In the end, it was written down by the Sisters themselves, for O’Connor remained firm in her judgment that she did not have the talent for this sort of thing and that the project would be the better off for her keeping her distance from it. Yet she was drawn into it after all, recommending a publisher, meeting with the nuns a couple of times, and writing an introduction. The book itself is long out of print and available only in used book stores. But O’Connor’s *Introduction* lives on and is always read by any serious reader of her work, and in that sense Mary Ann’s story remains a part of American literature and so endures as a small pillar of faith, a minor milestone of the truth.

It is a remarkable story whose remarkable nature is discovered chiefly in its ordinariness. As O’Connor noted, Mary Ann really stands for all those cancer patients who have found help (medical, material, spiritual) at the hands of the Hawthorne Dominicans, and there have been many of these. In the Communion of Saints, this is what you find; this is how the grace of Christ binds us to each other and to the Father of all.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of:
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by:

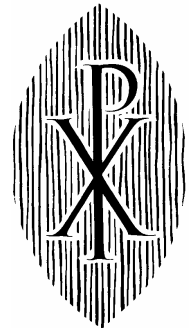
Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll:
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name:

Address:

City, State, Zip Code:

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