

Traveling Companion: The Life you save may be your own

Fr. Michael Tracey

Some time ago, I showed the galley of a book I was working on to a well-known priest psychologist and author to get some feedback. He surprised me when he said that my writing style was very much like that of Flannery O'Connor, the well-known Southern writer. I had read several of her books over the years and been impressed.

Recently, I read a book, *"The Life You Save May Be Your Own – An American Pilgrimage"* by Paul Elie. The 555 pages profiles such American Catholic icons as Dorothy Day, founder of The Catholic Worker; Trappist monk, Thomas Merton; doctor and writer, Walter Percy and of course, Flannery O'Connor.

Having read many of the writings of the above mentioned authors, I wondered how their Catholicism shaped their writing. Elie tries to show how "four Catholics of rare sophistication overcame the narrowness of the Church and the suspicions of the culture to achieve a distinctly American Catholic outlook." He suggests that the four writers were on a pilgrimage, on a journey in search of evidence for reports heart, hoping to be eyewitnesses, seeking to confirm the experience of others and be changed by it. In literature, they found religious experience, not only described but also imagined and they conveyed it as believable, profound and exciting.

How did Catholicism shape a Dorothy Day who experienced the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, devoured novelists like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and had an abortion; or Thomas Merton whose mother informed him by mail from her hospital bed that she was dying and would not see him again; or a Walker Percy, orphaned when he was sixteen, haunted by family suicides and melancholia, while still wanting to be a priest because he wanted intently to believe; or a Flannery O'Connor who made the newsreels of the day with a chicken who walked backward and forward and who couldn't escape being hounded by God and eventually was hounded toward him?

Day, the reformer; Merton, the rebel; Percy, the searcher and O'Connor, the continued their pilgrimage. The pilgrims yearned to see God. Their lives became a pilgrimage and sometimes the religious yearning became a religion unto itself, often finding its source in the imagination of the particular artist. All seemed to grasp the idea of the holiness of the ordinary.

Merton read James Joyce, the Confession of St. Augustine, the Imitation of Christ, the poem of Gerald Manley Hopkins which led him to become Catholic. He then devoured and tried to practice the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

Each writer, in their own way, was a pilgrim, yearning to see God. "Life becomes a pilgrimage and sometimes religious yearning becomes a religion unto itself, often finding its source in the imagination of the artist." For Percy and O'Connor, the pilgrim is nothing if not an independent striving to God without obvious means of support. All four seemed to grasp the idea of the holiness in the ordinary. Merton, rejected by the Franciscans, began to see the Trappist monastery as a living Christian liberation force at the center of America. Percy became Catholic because "it offered him a community and set him apart. It had a philosophy but was not a philosophy. It was not about writing but would be good for his writing." In becoming a novelist and a Catholic, he sought not only "to diagnose his own unhappiness but to remedy it."