

Our Exuberant Procession To an Everlasting Pentecost

THE LATE AMERICAN WRITER FLANNERY O'CONNOR is remembered for her astounding ability to express the deepest truths of life and faith in the language of ordinary, fractured humanity. Her short story, "Revelation,"² is the tale of one woman's redemption from a self-assured and bigoted form of religion, to a vision of God's all-inclusive welcoming of the motley crowd of humanity into the arms of salvation. Echoing Jesus' parable of the self-righteous and the humble,³ the main character, Ruby Turpin, finds herself praying aloud in the waiting room of a doctor's office, thanking God for having created her, she says, such a 'good person'—in no way like those misfit others.

Confronted by a young student named Mary Grace, she is told that, far from being a model of virtue, she is nothing but a self-centered bigot. In a play-on-words, Ruby Turpin is confronted by the difficult word of Grace, and is offered the opportunity to change. What unfolds is a kind of crisis of identity for Mrs. Turpin.



WOODCUT BY HELEN SIEGL

After a long period of self-pity — how anyone could say such words to her? — she eventually lets in the challenge, and begins to change. Her conversion is symbolized by a vision she experiences standing near the pigpen on her farm: a vision of the mass of ragged humanity raucously marching into the Reign of God, playing musical instruments and singing their off-key Hallelujahs — with the misfits, the poor, and the racially excluded *leading* the parade. It is a revelation of the unlimited ingathering of God's mercy.

As though this were not enough of a gospel shock, she spots *herself* at the end of this long, wild procession — Ruby Turpin, included in the marching, rejoicing throng! Her vision near the pigpen becomes her own experience of Pentecost, in which people of every nation, race, and tongue are gathered by the outpouring of God's vivifying Spirit.⁴

As we pray in the eucharistic prayer, “Gather people of every race, language, and way of life, to share in the one eternal banquet with Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵

In Flannery O'Connor's parable, we *ourselves* are drawn unwittingly into the dynamics of the plot. We become participants in the story of grace. O'Connor reminds us of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, speaking to self-assured, self-justifying religious people, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Reign of God ahead of you!”⁶

These are words of challenge, provoking a crisis of identity; but as such, *they are gospel*, a word of creation offering us an opening for newness.

First, the word of challenge: Acutely aware of our human slippage into personal and societal self-deception, many of the paths of Christian spirituality offer us tools for a critical discernment of truth. If we are engaged on these paths, we can be opened to the truth of our life in this world, and to the directions in which our lives are moving. We can be re-oriented toward a human life that participates

in the communion of our triune God. So, first we are asked: what are *our* blind spots, *our* bigotries, *and our* false assumptions about others and about ourselves?

Our nation, with arrogant self-assurance, continues to inflict the barbarities of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Adding to the outrages of war, the toll in countless dead and wounded, the brutal humiliations and violations of prisoners, and the spiral of revenge, our nation continues to close its borders and to fill its prisons — profoundly suspicious of all who are “different” from us, especially Arabs and Muslims. Our leaders thank God that we are “not like the others,” and that our presumptively “just” ends justify the means. Our civil liberties, and the respect for international law, are being eroded in the name of “national security.” We have become blind to the fact that true security is based on justice, not revenge, and can never be gained at the expense of others. God's good creation has been shrunk to a projection of our greed and will-to-power. As a nation, who are becoming? We suffer a crisis of identity.

In the church, the unsettledness of our postmodern culture has led many to fearfully retreat from the promise of renewal opened for us by the Second Vatican Council. Today, we are experiencing a tenacious retrenchment—a re-building of the bastions, based on a conviction that we are somehow different in God's eyes from the “others,” the “outsiders.” How far we have come from the transformative inspiration of Blessed Pope John XXIII! He summoned us to offer to the world the healing mercy of the Good Shepherd, rather than anathemas and condemnations; and to be a light *in the midst* of the nations, not a fortress set apart for the few. We are forfeiting the ancient sense of *catholicity*, the experience of Christian communities as a symphonic orchestra directed by the Holy Spirit. As church, we too suffer a crisis of identity.

But remember that the word of challenge is gospel (good news) for us, offering us an opening for newness. This troubled season compels us to rediscover our identity *in the flame of Pentecost*, not as a past event, but as *an erupting gift in the present*, God's response to our cry, “Come, Holy Spirit.” Times like this, therefore, offer us a serious call to conversion: “You, who are *Shalom*, come and abide among us. Make us ready to receive You!” To whose voice will we listen? Whose song will lead us? The voices of fear and suspicion, or the trumpeting melody of the Creator Spirit, who promises to make all things whole and new? The early monastic writer, John Cassian, upon whose teaching Benedict drew, spoke of monastic spirituality as culminating in what he called “*fiery prayer*,” in which we are illuminated by the gratuitous outpouring of the divine light, and not by “narrow human words.” Cassian continues, “It gushes forth as from a most abundant fountain, and speaks ineffably to God.”² In that healing Fire, we are enabled to see things aright. The Fire of Pentecost. The Living Water surging deep within.

In his collection *Leaves of Grass*, the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman has offered us a song of freedom. To ears attuned to the language of the scriptures, and to the images of the liturgy, this seemingly “secular” poem awakens resonances of Pentecost's promise of human relationships restored. Whitman cries out:

*Blow trumpeter free and clear, I follow thee,
While at thy liquid prelude, glad, serene,
The fretting world, the streets, the noisy hours of day withdraw,
A holy calm descends like dew upon me...
Thy song expands my numb'd imbonded spirit,
Thou freest, launchest me...
Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,*

*Give me for once its prophecy and joy.
O glad, exulting, culminating song! ...
War, sorrow, suffering gone — the rank earth purged —
nothing but joy left!*⁸

The life-giving Spirit of God is the “Trumpeter free and clear,” whose presence we invoke each time we gather for prayer. It is the Spirit's melody we have promised to follow. Our friend Mrs. Ruby Turpin, once so self-assured and narrow, shows us the promise of such a deep conversion. We too can undergo the saving crisis of identity—which is the work of grace. We can rediscover who we are meant to be, receiving the gift of becoming Spirit-bearers in our world. Beyond our every expectation and sense of “decency,” we too are welcomed into the Spirit's wild, exuberant procession toward an everlasting Pentecost: Fire, Living Water, Trumpeter free and clear.

-
1. Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373 C.E.), *On the Incarnation of the Word*.
 2. Flannery O'Connor, “Revelation,” in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971) 488-509.
 3. Luke 18: 9-14.
 4. Acts 2: 1-12.
 5. Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II.
 6. Matthew 21: 31.
 7. John Cassian (born 360 C.E.), *The Conferences*, “Ninth Conference on Prayer, XXV.1.
 8. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) “The Mystic Trumpeter,” from *Leaves of Grass*. Emphasis added.

Spring/Summer 2004 Bulletin



The Monks of Weston Priory
58 Priory Hill Road, Weston, VT 05161-6400
Tel: 802-824-5409; Fax: 802-824-3573