

THE FOLLY OF A SOUL

Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013

"Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to . . . I do not know You God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside . . . I do not mean to deny the traditional prayers I have said all my life; but I have been saying them and not feeling them. My attention is always very fugitive. This way I have it every instant. I can feel a warmth of love heating me when I think & write this to You."

Thus begins the private journal that Flannery O'Connor maintained at intervals during the years 1946 and 1947. Not yet famous for her quirky characters, Southern mores, and love of peacocks, O'Connor was still a young student at the celebrated Iowa Writers' Workshop, wanting to succeed both in this life and the next. "Dear God please help me to be an artist, please let it lead to You." She wished to be "intelligently holy," and was grateful that God had given her "Catholicity," calling it "His provision for all mediocre souls."

Though O'Connor simply wrote her name and "Jan. 1946 – Sept. 47" on the journal's cover, the title supplied by the publisher is apt. What one discovers inside is not the ordinary, self-indulgent journalizing of youth, or tender, girlish sentiments of the "Dear Diary" sort. The journal is essentially and unmistakably a collection of deeply personal prayers, at times almost examinations of conscience—a transcript of the heart of an extraordinarily mature young woman whose "interest," as she puts it, is in her "immortal soul and what keeps it pure." "I do not want this to be a metaphysical exercise," she makes clear, "but something in praise

of God . . . Give me the grace, dear God, to adore You for even this I cannot do for myself . . . Give me the grace to be impatient for the time when I shall see You face to face and need no more stimulus than that to adore You.”

William Sessions, a longtime friend of O'Connor and professor of English at Georgia State University, contributes a helpful introduction with remarks both biographical and literary: “[The] journal entries were not as spontaneous as they might seem. Even at twenty-one, O'Connor was a craftswoman of the first order, the facsimile that appears in this volume reveals her careful emendations. To dramatize her desire—and she was foremost a dramatic writer—she recognized that she must not report, but ‘render.’”

“Her letters of action, written in search of her lover,” Sessions adds, “became entries in a journal. The entries themselves could be simple, intimate, at moments childlike. At the same time, they could dramatize desires that were Olympian.” Of course, the lover O'Connor sought was not just some human heartthrob, but God himself—the only lover who, in creating goodness rather than responding to it, loves us not because we are good, but because he is.

O'Connor desired above all to return that love (though in one entry she adds an amusing caveat: “I do not mean becoming a nun”). “I don't want,” she explains, “to be doomed to mediocrity in my feeling for Christ. I want to feel. I want to love. Take me, dear Lord, and set me in the direction I am to go. My Lady of Perpetual Help, pray for me.” Though she feared, like many, the sorrow that can result from unfulfilled natural desires, O'Connor perceived quite clearly that no human love, indeed no finite, earthly good whatever, satisfies the infinite longing of the human soul. “I do not want to be lonely all my life but people only make us lonelier by reminding us of God.”

And yet, the ability to love and be loved on a human level is an indication that we are made in the image of God and capable, by grace, of loving him. "Man's desire for God," O'Connor writes, "is bedded in his unconscious & seeks to satisfy itself in physical possession of another human being." Indeed, paradoxically, "the more conscious the desire for God becomes the more successful union with another becomes because the intelligence realizes the relation in its relation to a greater desire."

In other words, loving God and living for heaven does not jeopardize, but rather safeguards our earthly loves, making them healthier and more human. Those who love the Creator are best able to love his creatures; those who live for heaven get the most out of life on earth. Sadly, "the modern man isolated from faith, from raising his desire for God into a conscious desire, is sunk into the position of seeing physical love as an end in itself. Thus his romanticizing it, wallowing in it, & then cynicizing it." O'Connor grasped at a young age what many learn the hard way: "Perversion is the end result of denying or revolting against supernatural love." In a word, "sin is large & stale."

At the same time, O'Connor was aware of the apparent folly of the soul "who wants God, who made the earth, to be its Lover." "What I am asking for is really very ridiculous," she admits. "Oh Lord, I am saying, at present I am a cheese, make me a mystic, immediately. But then God can do that—make mystics out of cheeses." It is the boast of the Catholic Church, to borrow John Henry Newman's expression, that it makes ordinary men and women consorts of God, espousing their souls to him. Sanctifying grace, bestowed in the sacraments of the Church, accomplishes this, making of our earthly lives nothing less than an anticipation of heaven: the seed that is the life of grace on earth flowers as the life of glory in heaven. Still, it is only in the latter that we find perfect happiness, which O'Connor felt. "But I want to get near You. Yet it seems almost a sin to suggest such a thing even. Perhaps

Communion doesn't give the nearness I mean. The nearness I mean comes after death perhaps."



JOE McTYRE - FLANNERY O'CONNOR & HER PEACOCK

Still in her early twenties, O'Connor had not yet been diagnosed with lupus, the disease that would claim her life less than two decades later. With keen insight into the mysterious coexistence of God and suffering, she noted that suffering, in God's wise and providential care, conduces to our good. Knowing this, of course, does not make pain any less painful: "I am afraid of pain and I suppose that is what we have to have to get grace. Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace, Oh Lord. Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing." Perhaps

O'Connor had a premonition of the suffering she herself would later endure.

"If I ever do get to be a fine writer, it will not be because I am a fine writer," O'Connor humbly discloses, "but because God has given me credit for a few of the things He kindly wrote for me." It would seem that God has indeed given her much credit, if a place in the history of American literature means anything. Her letters sparkle with wit and what might be described as good theological common sense; her essays are serious reflections on the nature of fiction and fiction-writing. Though her fiction contains few Catholic characters and is famously described as grotesque, her two novels and numerous short stories are like modern-day parables; displaying prophetic insight, they are blunt, disturbing portrayals of the disfigurement that results from sin and a personal or cultural neglect of God.

A Prayer Journal will profit those who already know and appreciate Flannery O'Connor's writing, as well as those seeking to form an acquaintance with this important American author. A slim book (half taken up by the facsimile mentioned above), it contains just twenty-four entries ranging from a couple of sentences to a couple of pages. Readers will find, however, that they have obtained quality in place of quantity—*A Prayer Journal* is one of those rare books that, upon finishing, one would happily begin again.

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