**Flannery O'Connor: Assaulting the Imagination**

**Authored By:**Father Michael Paul Gallagher, SJ

Flannery O'Connor: Assaulting the Imagination

Father Michael Paul Gallagher, SJ\*

*The following is an article slightly adapted by the author from a chapter in "Faith Maps: ten religious explorers from Newman to Joseph Ratzinger", London: Darton Longman & Todd,*  
2010.

When she died of lupus in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine, Flannery O'Connor was already well known, and even controversial, as a Catholic writer of fiction. If her style of drastic distortion or Southern Grotesque, as she sometimes described it, left some people confused or even stunned, that was just the impact she wanted. Faith for her often meant an upheaval or rupture with what we take for granted about ourselves or about religion.

Her fame has soared in the decades since her death. Thomas Merton saw her as an equal of Sophocles. More than seventy books have been written on her work. When her essays and letters were published, they showed her to be the most theologically alert novelist of the entire century. She called herself a "hillbilly Thomist" who read Aquinas for twenty minutes every night before going to bed. On this point something of her ironic spirit is seen in a letter of 1955 (imitating the style of the Summa):

If my mother were to come in during this process and say, "Turn off the light. It's late", I with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression, would reply, "On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes" (*The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor* [*HB*], New York: Little, Brown and Co, 2009, pp. 93-94.).

Her theological horizon was further nourished during the last eight years of her life, when she wrote short reviews of at least a hundred religious books for local Catholic periodicals, thus encountering the works of such figures as Péguy, Maritain, Voegelin, Guardini, Barth, Teilhard de Chardin, Congar, Vawter, von Hügel, Edith Stein and William Lynch. She also read various works of such French authors as Mauriac, Mounier, Bernanos, Simone Weil, Gilson and Daniélou. "I read a lot of theology because it makes my writing bolder" she once commented (Brad Gooch, *Flannery: a life of Flannery O'Connor* [*BGF*], ed. by Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1979, p. 228), and on another occasion she added: "I'm no theologian, but all this is vital to me" (*Collected Works* [*CW*], The Library of America: New York, 1988, p. 1118).

The Irish novelist Brian Moore, himself a declared agnostic, admitted that he had disliked Flannery O'Connor's stories until one day when he picked up her large volume of letters, *The Habit of Being*, and realised the richly ironic spirit in which her fiction was written. Her narrative style is at once tongue-in-cheek in its accumulation of mocking details, and yet deadly serious in its scope to embody encounters with grace. She was dismissive about a Catholic tendency for instant answers and hence a divorce of reason from imagination. These reductive approaches will be healed only "if we realize that faith is a 'walking in darkness' and not a theological solution to mystery". In this sense she wanted her fiction to lead readers towards such "deeper and stranger visions" (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* [*MM*], ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, London: Faber & Faber, 1972, p. 184).

In fact she remarked that, judging from the letters she received, prisoners seemed to understand her best, because they knew something about destructiveness and conflict. In her life too she knew plenty about struggles and shadows, especially through her long battle with sickness. From her mid-twenties she was aware of the possibility of an early death, and no doubt it gave urgency to her tone. "Sickness", she once remarked, "is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, a place where there is no company". But her letters never display any self-pity on this score and she expressed impatience with those who thought her writing was handicapped by her illness. I write with my head, not my feet, she told one interviewer who asked about her crutches. Less than a month before she died she wrote to a religious sister (with word play on her illness, lupus):  
"The wolf, I'm afraid, is inside tearing up the place... I count on your prayers" (*HB*, p. 591).

Shock strategy

O'Connor's horizon offers a useful foil to the more academic authors explored in other chapters here. She dramatises again and again the costly transformation of vision that faith entails and the subterfuges we use for escaping its more demanding aspects. She told of one lady in California who complained that the stories did not lift her heart when she came home tired. O'Connor commented shrewdly that "if her heart had been in the right place, it would have been lifted up" (*MM*, p. 48). She goes on to say that when our sense of evil is diluted, we easily forget "the price of restoration" (*MM*, 48). T.S. Eliot recognised her "uncanny talent" but some stories "horrified" him and his nerves could not "take much of a disturbance" (*BGF*, p. 272). O'Connor would have been happy with this reaction: "you have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you" (*HB*, p. 229). When the surrounding culture does not share your Christian faith, "then you have to make your vision apparent by shock — to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" (*CW*, pp. 805-806). Thus the wit of her fiction was often aimed at the defence mechanisms of a secular culture, or indeed of cock-sure religiousness. The novelist John Hawkes described her attitude to life as full of energy, detachment, pleasure and grace, and because of this her writings could be wry, brutal and comic. She would probably have identified with this provocative statement from another novelist, Georges Bernanos: "The modern world needs to hear a few liberating voices, but the voices that set us free are not the tranquillizing, reassuring ones".

In July 1955 O'Connor was delighted to get a letter from a certain Betty Hester who recognised that her stories were mainly about God. She wrote back (in the first of what was to be a series of nearly 200 letters) saying, "I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness" (*CW*, p. 942). In a second letter to Hester two weeks later she added that for her "there is only one Reality", the Incarnation in which "nobody believes" today, and hence "my audience are the people who think God is dead" (*CW*, p. 943). In one of her lectures she put it more strongly: "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause" (*CW*, p. 805).

Incarnational prophet

In this way O'Connor set out to disturb the complacency of both agnostics and over-secure believers and she did so through a certain extremism of style and plot. She scorned any form of didactic religious fiction, describing a novel by Cardinal Spellman as useful "as a doorstop" but not helping the standards of Catholic literature (*MM*, p. 175). Similarly she hated "pious language" because, as she wrote to an unbelieving friend, "I believe the realities it hides" (*CW*, p. 1035). Her language had to be down to earth, showing rather than telling (to echo a distinction she borrowed from Henry James). Therefore an "incarnational art", she argued, should never become detached from a "dramatic sense" of the concrete (*MM*, p. 68, pp. 146-147). A Christian novelist moves in a "larger universe" than mere naturalism, because "the natural world contains the supernatural"(*MM*, p. 175). It was never a question of climbing out of the narrative into its meaning, because a good story resists paraphrase: instead "it hangs on and expands in the mind" (*MM*, p. 108). She chose to recount tales of fundamentalist figures of the Bible Belt, ranging from characters of ferocious faith to others of fierce atheism. Rooted in credible and often comic externals her hope was to push her plot and her readers "towards mystery and the unexpected" (*MM*, p. 44), because "mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind", and, in her view, often eliminated by education.

O'Connor's path towards faith meant going through the surfaces of life towards the shock of strangeness. She came to define this approach as prophetic and recounted in various letters her lucky discovery that Aquinas held that "prophetic vision is a quality of the imagination" (*CW*, p.1116) and that "prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet" (and not on any moral quality). She came to hold that enlarging people's imagination was a key role for the Church and for a Catholic writer of fiction. Her stories wanted to serve faith by showing imagination being challenged and changed in her characters, and at the same time leading her readers towards a larger vision of reality. "The prophet is a realist of distances", in the sense of "seeing far things close up" and things near at hand "with their extensions of meaning" (*MM*, p. 44). This prophetic realism was embodied in some of her characters as well as in her fictional method. "It is a realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth" (*MM*, p. 179). And the hidden truth nearly always involves an amazing grace, not as a soft music but as a divine explosion. On this disturbing transformation she pulled no punches: "I don't know if anyone can be converted without seeing themselves in a blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime" (*HB*, p. 427).

O'Connor was a proudly orthodox Catholic, but she was not slow to point out and even satirize the human warts of the Church. "Ideal Christianity doesn't exist" (, p. 1182). Although many of her characters come from low-church traditions, she commented that "Smugness is the Great Catholic Sin. I find it in myself" (*CW*, p. 983). People who know "only the Jansenist-Mechanical Catholic" are right to be put off: this mindset represents not "faith but a kind of false certainty", and in place of "the body of Christ" it puts a "poor man's insurance system" (*CW*, pp. 1037-1038). These "unimaginative and half-dead Catholics" would be "startled to know" the full richness of the tradition they cling to with a kind of blind loyalism (*CW*, p. 1118).

If she attacked superficial Church belonging, she remained a great defender of a genuinely Church-grounded faith. Without any "real imaginative vision of what the Church is", she told her friend Cecil Dawkins in 1959, it is easy to reject a sociological image of it, not realising that "dogma is the guardian of mystery" (*CW*, pp. 1115-1116). Most discussions of religion seemed to be ignorant, superficial and unworthy of the true nature of the issues. Without a "larger imaginative view" one cannot be "alive to spiritual reality" (*CW*, p. 1117). If her writing was to be truly prophetic, it had to find ways of awakening that spiritual imagination wavelength, of making the realities of Incarnation and Redemption dramatically real, and hence of suggesting the seriousness of any faith option.

The impact of grace

She seems more interested in pre-evangelisation than in more direct communication of the gospel (although she would dislike this jargon). Her narratives work indirectly to provoke an awakening to religious possibilities, instead of communicating the creedal content of faith. What she remarked of one story can be more widely applied: "It's not so much a story of conversion as of self-knowledge, which I suppose has to be the first step in conversion" (*CW*, p. 1076). Part of the rhetoric of her fiction is to enlarge the reader's self-awareness, even if she has to use shock tactics. In the same letter she spoke about the "religious sense" being deadened when doctrines are reduced to human proportions in order to explain them away: as a result "there is no sense of the power of God that could produce the Incarnation and the Resurrection" (*CW*, p. 5077). Therefore her hope was to change the disposition of her' readers, by jolting them out of their securities and towards some imaginative openness to religious experience.

In this sense her stories often hinge on moments of grace that are not just surprising but sometimes  
violent. "It seems to me that all good stories are about conversion, about a character's changing . . .  
The action of grace changes a character" (*CW*, p. 1067). She stressed the conflictual nature of an  
encounter with grace, and how, if readers do not appreciate this, they dismiss her stories as merely pessimistic: "All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal" (*CW*, p. 1067). She had little time for people who thought of religion as meeting their own felt needs and so there is often a hard edge to her picture of faith : "truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally"; on the contrary faith can be "emotionally disturbing, downright repulsive" as in the darker experiences of saints (*CW*, p. 952). Faith, in her view, often causes upheaval before it can experience the fruits of joy. She does not seem to have known the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, but she would have appreciated his metaphor that grace enters a receptive spirit like water gently into a sponge, but in the case of someone closed in egoism it is like water falling more noisily on a stone. Her stories are narrative dynamite to break open that stone. As one of her early commentators said, she undermines our rationalism but you don't realize it until afterwards.

After her death *Time* magazine was partly right in its comment that she "wrote exclusively of ultimate things". It is true that her stories often depict people arriving unexpectedly at moments of death or judgement, and it is equally true that she presents these realities with a starkness that is intended to shake people's self-satisfaction. She was struck by this sentence from Emmanuel Mounier: "Love is a struggle: life is a struggle against death" (*BGF*, p. 308). She must have had her own daily sense of mortality and yet her fiction is never directly about herself. She transformed her own shadows into stories that were comic, incarnational and never moralistic. The version of faith she presents can seem austere, but her narratives of ferocious humour often point to more joyful discoveries. They are also born from a real solidarity and compassion for agonized unbelievers. In a letter of 1959 she wrote: "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened" (*CW*, p. 1110).

*\*Irish Jesuit, Rector of the Collegio Bellarmino, Professor emeritus of Fundamental Theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University*

Taken from:  
L'Osservatore Romano  
Weekly Edition in English  
6 April 2011, page 12