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**FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S VISION OF FAITH, CHURCH AND MODERN
CONSCIOUSNESS**

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My days as a teacher of college English are long past, and now I am a Roman Catholic archbishop, who agreed to speak, from that viewpoint, about a woman and a writer whom I admire greatly, Flannery O'Connor. I remember, though, what Flannery O'Connor wrote after meeting Paul Hallinan, the new Archbishop of Atlanta, whom she admired. She said: "Usually I think the Church's motto is The Wrong Man for the Job; but not this time."¹

That pungent little verdict suggests much of what I believe is wonderful and valuable in Flannery O'Connor: the savvy, sly wit; the dead-on honest observation; the faith, strong in spite of all; and the Christian realist's hope that this time it might be better, but not easily, and not likely for long.

Flannery O'Connor died during the Church's Second Vatican Council, while the bishops were writing anew what she had always known: that the Church is the Body of Christ, the People of God, that laypeople are its flesh and blood and that the clergy and religious orders are its servant-leaders. While Flannery O'Connor was a supreme artist in fiction, this afternoon I want to suggest how she is also a particularly valuable witness to the Catholic Church and its leaders in this country. Hers is the testimony of a watchful, honest, faith-filled, eloquent lay person, and she had much to say about the experience of living her faith within the Roman Catholic Church, especially in a society and a culture that had marginalized genuine Christian faith and practice. I invite you now to listen with me to what she said in her letters about several closely connected aspects of Roman Catholic experience:

1) the experience of being a believer, a disciple of Jesus Christ; 2) the cost of discipleship; 3) the power of grace in the experience of the believer; and, 4) the experience of the Church as the setting of that life of faith and discipleship, a setting that she saw as all too human as well as divine in origin.

Besides O'Connor's letters, collected and edited by Sally Fitzgerald, in The Habit of Being, I will make references to a recent work by Paul Elie, The Life You Save May Be Your Own, a study of four mid-twentieth century American Catholic writers: Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy and Dorothy Day. Elie drew the title for his study from the title of a Flannery O'Connor short story. I am also indebted to George A. Kilcourse, Jr., for his work, *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination: A World with Everything Off Balance*.

Flannery O'Connor said of herself as a writer: "I feel that if I were not a Catholic I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything" (p.114). The Church, she claimed, was "... the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endure" (p. 90). Why? Quite simply because the Church taught as its central doctrine the Incarnation, the belief that God became human and creaturely, with us, in Jesus Christ. Flannery O'Connor believed that teaching, and, for her, its truth transformed everything in life: She said: "... the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (p.92). Thus there follows the clash of consciousness between O'Connor and her audience, the clash between the believers and the non-believers, between contradictory sets of assumptions about human experience.

She claimed the Incarnation as the principle of her spirituality: "... if you believe in the divinity of Christ, you have to cherish the world at the same time that you struggle to endure it" (p.90). But beyond shaping her personal spirituality, Incarnation directed her strategy as a writer. She asserted that, "... the writer has to succeed in making the divinity of Christ seem consistent with the structure of all reality. This has to be got across implicitly in spite of a world that doesn't feel it, in spite of characters who don't live it" (p.290). Incarnation even helps explain an aspect of O'Connor's writing which is particularly challenging for many readers: The grotesque. She said: "The Incarnation makes us see the grotesque as grotesque" (p.227).

Paul Elie gives us this analysis of freakish and grotesque characters in O'Connor's fiction: "The grotesque character or freak plays various roles in her work, serving a broad range of dramatic purposes. The freak is an image of human nature deformed by sin, as is the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," or an instance of human nature transformed by God's grace, as Hazel Motes is at the end of Wise Blood. The freak is a figure for modern man, like the psychologist Rayber in The Violent Bear It Away, reduced by the scientific worldview to an aggregate of tendencies and statistics; or a character deliberately distorted by the author, like the tattooed O.E. Parker in "Parker's Back," so as to startle the unwitting reader to attention."

Christ as the light of the world, as light on the world, makes the believer see things differently, even contrarily. This observation brings to mind the words of Christ to the Pharisees, in Luke's gospel, regarding material wealth: "You justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts: for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

Flannery O'Connor claimed that faith was essential to her, but she never claimed it was easy. She described the mid-twentieth century as particularly uncongenial to genuine Christian faith:

... the religious sense seems to be bred out of [people] in the kind of society we've lived in since the 18th century. There is no sense of the power of God that could produce the Incarnation and the Resurrection. They are all so busy explaining away the Virgin birth and such things, reducing everything to human proportions, that in time they lose even the sense of the human itself, what they were aiming to reduce everything to. (p.299)

The New Yorker magazine reviewed rather dismissively Flannery O'Connor's short story collection, A Good Man is Hard to Find, after which she wrote a friend regarding the review: "It was a case in which it was easy to see that the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead."

Years later, when her novel, Wise Blood was re-issued, she wrote in an introductory Author's Note: "Wise Blood was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence."

O'Connor said that some writers had even enshrined this lack of faith as a prerequisite for the artist's vision: "It is popular to believe that in order to see clearly one must believe nothing" (p. 147). As a young student, Flannery O'Connor's antidote to that false assumption was what she called "Christian skepticism," and she recommended it to others: "Learn what you can but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free - not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you" (p. 478). Also, "What kept me a skeptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read" (p. 476).

On another occasion, Flannery O'Connor dealt with this conflict between faith and unbelief, and its effect on the writer who is a believer: "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else, and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of our times. It's hard to believe always but more so in the world we live in now. There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it would be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not"

So the believer needs patience and passion. According to Flannery O'Connor, faith naturally waxes and wanes, and we must not panic or jump to conclusions because of that. She wrote: "...let me tell you this: faith comes and goes. It rises and falls like the tides of an invisible ocean. If it is presumptuous to think that faith will stay with you forever, it is just as presumptuous to think that unbelief will" (p. 451). She was especially fond of the prayer addressed to Christ in the gospel: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (p.92). She wrote: "It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospel, and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith" (p. 476).

The Christian must yearn for and seek out faith, not just grudgingly take delivery of it

if God sends it along: "Faith is a gift, but the will has a great deal to do with it. The loss of it is basically a failure of appetite, assisted by sterile intellect" (p. 451). But Christian faith cannot remain in the intellect; it must be lived for, with, and in Christ. Flannery O'Connor declared: "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe" (p. 354). This cost of believing, of discipleship is crucial to an understanding of genuine Christian faith, as opposed to the casual, superficial, cultural Christianity that she so deplored. Genuine Christian faith transforms the meaning and value of everything; cosmetic Christianity merely brightens Sunday morning and highlights the tiny compartment of life labeled "religion." Flannery O'Connor would have appreciated the distinction made by the Protestant theologian, John MacMurray:

The maxim of illusory religion runs: "Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you"; that of real religion, on the contrary, is "Fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of."²

Flannery O'Connor pointed out that, in her fiction, there are no halfway positions for the characters: "Everything works toward its true end or away from it. Everything is ultimately saved or lost" (p. 350). At this point let me pause a moment to cite a crucial passage from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 8, a passage that sets forth the cost of discipleship and the paradox of values at the heart of this Christian faith, in the sense of all being saved or all being lost:

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke of this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does but as human beings do." He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? What could one give in exchange for his life?" (Mark 8:31-37)

Let me make three brief observations on this teaching of Jesus, then consider Flannery O'Connor's reflections of it. First, when Peter tries to argue against Jesus's first prediction of his death on the cross, I believe there is a good reason why Jesus addresses him as "Satan." Peter in that moment reminds Jesus of what Satan had tried to do in his three earlier temptations, that is, argue for a "short cut," easy version of salvation, which would eliminate any need for living, dying, and rising for others. (Flannery O'Connor made numerous trenchant observations about easy, "short cut" religion.) Second, the cost of discipleship is described as triple in form: 1) self-denial; 2) carrying (sharing in) the cross; 3) following in the steps (the example and teaching) of Jesus.

The third point is the paradox at the heart of Christian faith and life: the "saved" life vs. the "lost" life. Here is one way of understanding that paradox (so prominent in Flannery O'Connor's fiction): each of us can save his or her life in a worldly sense, i.e., we can go off and make the best self we can of ourselves, for ourselves, by ourselves, with no real reference to Christ, but if we do that we lose the life we could have had in following him. Or, we can let go to grace, choose the "lost" life, become the person we were created, redeemed and called to be in Christ, i.e., get lost in Christ, which, for a Christian, is to be saved - but, of course, we "lose" the self we could have become through self-absorption and self-fulfillment.

Now back to O'Connor on these points. In regard to the value of self-denial in following Christ, Flannery O'Connor made the following observation on members of the Beat Generation as opponents of materialism: "They call themselves holy but holiness costs and so far as I can see they pay nothing. It's true that grace is the free gift of God, but in order to put yourself in the way of being receptive to it you have to practice self-denial" (p. 336). She defended asceticism, a value less and less popular in our time: "Accepting oneself does not preclude an attempt to become better. Self-torture is abnormal; asceticism is not" (p. 458).

In regard to suffering, to meeting and bearing the cross in following Christ, she said of her stories: "It is necessary to throw the weight of circumstances against the character I favor. The friends of God suffer, etc." (p. 120). She claimed that her stories were "about original sin" (p. 74), and that they were misunderstood by readers who missed the faith context. "The stories are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than

Christian realism. I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and I have reported on the progress of a few of them... and when I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror" (p. 90). The "wrong horror" leaves the reader aghast at how destructive divine grace seems to be of worldly values. The "right horror" is grace rejected from a "nice" worldly life.

In one letter Flannery O'Connor observes that "Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does. The Church does well to hold its own; you are asking that she show a profit. When she shows a profit, you have a saint, and not necessarily a canonized one."

Paul Elie points out that Flannery O'Connor, a Catholic writer living in and writing about the overwhelmingly Protestant South, often indicated what she thought the Catholic Church and the Protestant South had in common: "the Bible, a religious heritage, an awareness of human limitation, a respect for the concrete and the actual, and a recognition that 'good and evil in every culture tend to be joined at the spine. '"

But how does one know that one has chosen the "lost" life of Christ over the "saved" or worldly life? Flannery O'Connor gave the standard, the only, answer - charity or love - but she gave anything but the standard spin to that answer. She was fond of Gerard Manley Hopkins' simple, two word response to Robert Bridges' request for advice on how to open himself to faith: "Give alms" (pp. 164 and 476).

The following of Christ is the living of Christian love, and she declared: "You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people's sufferings and not your own" (p. 453). But she knew how hard-won and elusive this love is, and how easily it is confused with its cheap imitations: "To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures" (p. 308). Again: "It is what is invisible that God sees and what the Christian must look for. Because he knows the consequences of sin, he knows how deep in you have to go to find love" (p. 308). Nevertheless, she was confident saying: "I believe love to be efficacious in the long run: (p.97).

To what did Flannery O'Connor credit this ultimate victory of love? The operation of God's grace - redeeming power - in the world, in his creatures, often in spite of them. Believers have to choose the "lost" life over and over again, not once and for all. She wrote in this regard:

I don't think of conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity, and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it. I measure God by everything I am not. I begin with that (p. 430).

How did Flannery O'Connor's "Christian realism" respond to the experience of the suffering of innocent human beings in the world around us? A group of Dominican nuns who ran a Free Cancer Home in Atlanta, Georgia, prevailed upon a very reluctant O'Connor to introduce and edit a memoir they intended to publish about Mary Ann, a terribly disfigured but very cheerful little girl who had lived and died among them.

What follows is Paul Elie's analysis of Flannery O'Connor's response to this challenge: "A child like Mary Ann, she observed, is obviously grotesque, and in the modern world such a child is thought to 'discredit the goodness of God.' How can a good God allow such a child to die? the Ivan Karamazovs of the world ask. How, moreover, can a good God allow such a child to be born? The modern unbeliever prides himself on his realism, his willingness to recognize suffering and to ponder the problem of evil directly. But in O'Connor's estimation such an outlook is not realistic; it is naive, sentimental, and even dangerous. It is the believer, not the unbeliever, who is the realist. In a child like Mary Ann the believer sees the likeness of every human person - deformed, limited, imperfect. In human deforming the believer sees 'the raw material of good.' In human suffering the believer sees the grounds of our common humanity, recognizing that it is through suffering, above all, that human beings are stirred to the love of one another, and to the love of God, who showed his love for humanity through his willingness to suffer as one of us."

Flannery O'Connor's characters wrestle with grace because she believed we all do. She said: "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. Priests resist it as well as others" (p. 307). God's grace reaches down past our self-satisfaction and self-absorption to where we yearn for him. She wrote: "God rescues us from ourselves if we want him to" (p.118).

Flannery O'Connor knew how difficult it was to portray these operations of grace to contemporary readers: "Part of the difficulty of all this is you write for an audience who doesn't know what grace is or doesn't recognize it when they see it. All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless, brutal, etc." (p. 275). Again she said: "For me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times" (p. 349).

In a lecture entitled "The Catholic Novelist and the Protestant South," Flannery O'Connor described the situation of the Christian disciple who is poet or storyteller, in what is for me a lovely and powerfully suggestive image: "The poet is traditionally a blind man. But the Christian Poet, and the storyteller as well, is like the blind man Christ touched, who looked then and saw men as if they were trees - but walking. Christ touched him again and he saw clearly. We will not see clearly until Christ touches us in death, but this first touch is the beginning of vision, and it is an invitation to deeper and stranger visions that we shall have to accept if we want to realize a Catholic literature."

O'Connor was not sanguine about the tastes and capacities of general audiences for fiction in the country in her day. She wrote to a friend, describing her talk at a ladies' book club: "The heart of my message to them was that they would all fry in hell if they didn't quit reading trash." About the fiction of the time she said, "There's many a best seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher."

But what about the believer's experience of Church? Our present age has been described as one in which people place a high value on spirituality and a low value on religion, especially organized religion. Of particular interest, then, is Flannery O'Connor's thinking about the experience of Church, the assembly of believers. She valued the Roman Catholic Church highly, but she observed it acutely, warts and all. If the Church made life endurable, it also provided much that had to be endured. She wrote: "You have to suffer as much from the church as for it. The only thing that makes the church endurable is that somehow it is the body of Christ, and on this we are fed" (p. 90). She went on to explain why we suffer from the Church: "The operation of the church is entirely set up for the sake of the sinner, which creates much misunderstanding among the smug" (p. 92). God, then, is as patient with the entire church as he is with each lost sheep, and many of us Catholics have very little patience with either.

The Catholic Church is made up of imperfect pilgrims on a long, difficult journey, and Flannery O'Connor described them well: "The Catholic Church is composed of those who accept what she teaches, whether they are good or bad, and there is constant struggle through the help of the sacraments to be good" (p. 346). T.S. Eliot says, in Choruses From The Rock, that modern people don't like the church because "She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they would be soft." ³ (Think of issues like abortion, euthanasia, welfare reform, capital punishment, etc.) I believe Miss O'Connor might have appreciated Eliot's remark.

Within the visible church, the Holy Spirit is constantly acting in the lives of its members, individually and collectively. Thus, the Church cannot be accurately judged or evaluated by what her critics observe externally. Flannery O'Connor pointed that out to one of her friends in these words:

You judge [the Church] strictly by its human element, by unimaginative and half-dead Catholics who would be startled to know the nature of what they defend by formula. The miracle is that the Church's dogma is kept pure both by and from such people. Nature is not prodigal of genius and the Church makes do with what nature gives her. At the age of 11, you encounter some old priest who calls you a heretic for inquiring about evolution; at about the same time Pere Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., is in China discovering Peking man. (p. 366)

The "human element" in the Church was a frequent target of Flannery O'Connor's wit, as when she proposed this motto for the Catholic press of her day: "We guarantee to corrupt nothing but your taste" (p.138). More seriously, she quoted St. Augustine's advice to the "wheat" in the Church not to leave the threshing floor of life before the harvest is complete, just because there is so much of that disgusting chaff around! (p. 330) In this connection, she slyly suggested what the difficulty may be for more sensitive Catholics (referring to one young woman in particular): "She probably sees more stupidity and vulgarity than she does sin and these are harder to put up with than sin, harder on the nerves." (p. 330)

Meanwhile, the world goes on judging the Church in utilitarian fashion, using the same standard it would apply to the Rotary or the Kiwanis. Miss O'Connor challenged this

approach: "Any Catholic or Protestant is defenseless before those who judge his religion by how well its members live up to it or are able to explain it" (p. 345). The surface is easy to judge, she was saying, but not the interior operations of the Holy Spirit. She illustrated this principle with a touching reference to the vocation of Catholic priests, whom she often found to be overworked and unimaginative. She wrote:

It is easy for any child to find out the faults in the sermon on his way home from Church every Sunday. It is impossible to find out the hidden love that makes a man, in spite of his intellectual limitations, his neuroticism, his lack of strength, give up his life to the service of God's people, however bumblingly he may go about it. (pp. 307-308)

While Flannery O'Connor defended her Church against superficial and unfair judgments, she was neither a whitewasher nor a fatalist, and she was an implacable foe of complacency. She believed that the Church must struggle toward greater virtue as surely as each of its members. She wrote quite forcefully in this regard: "It's our business to change the external faults of the Church - the vulgarity, the lack of scholarship, the lack of intellectual honesty - wherever we find them and however we can" (p. 308). Let me give three examples of Church faults she criticized and wished to see corrected. They are in order of increasing severity, I believe.

First, she condemned smugness as The Great Catholic Sin. Perhaps 45 years later, something else would head her list, but smugness would probably still be listed. She wrote of this smugness in these words: "I find it in myself and I don't dislike it any less. One reason Guardini is a relief to read is that he has nothing of it. With a few exceptions the American clergy, when it takes to the pen, brings this particular sin with it in full force" (p. 131). [Aside: About twenty years ago a bumper sticker appeared on cars, saying: "If you feel God is far away, guess who moved." If Flannery O'Connor had lived to see one of those signs on a Georgia road, I like to think that she would have skewered the sentiment as very smug, even as she chuckled at the rampant vulgarity of bumper sticker theology.]

Related to smugness is glibness, which she described as "the great danger in answering people's questions about religion" (p. 307). Again, a sense of mystery will give the Christian apologist a sense of humility: if I am convinced that I have the truth about God I am much more likely to be obnoxious about it, than if I am convinced that God's truth has

me.

Flannery O'Connor expressed impatience with the kind of Catholicism - and Catholic fiction - which kept everything nice, shallow, cute and safe. She described what she called "A nice vapid-Catholic distrust of finding God in action of any range and depth. This is not the kind of Catholicism that has saved me so many years in learning to write, but then this is not Catholicism at all" (p. 139). Genuine Catholicism, she felt, must be as radical and demanding as its Founder's teaching.

Still another Catholic fault O'Connor described is, I believe; an evergreen reality in the Church: A Jansenistic disdain for human weakness and struggle and distrust of questions, speculations and discussions of any depth. Of the pseudo-faith of such persons she said:

I know what you mean about being repulsed by the Church when you have only the Mechanical-Jansenist Catholic to judge it by. I think that the reason such Catholics are so repulsive is that they don't really have faith but a kind of false certainty. They operate by the slide rule and the Church for them is not the body of Christ but the poor man's insurance system. It's never hard for them to believe because actually they never think about it. Faith has to take in all the other possibilities it can (pp. 239-231).

In considering such people's self-righteous judgments of others, she made an acute observation: "Conviction without experience makes for harshness" (p. 97). By contrast, Christians who have struggled with their demons are better equipped to show compassion toward others.

Finally, some reflections on Flannery O'Connor's deep distaste and contempt for modern, sanitized, "empty" religion. Because she embraced an imaginative vision of religion as the mystery of God's saving action intersecting with all that is earthly, Flannery O'Connor remarked to one correspondent as follows: "All around you today you will find people accepting 'religion' that has been rid of its religious elements" (p. 365). Elsewhere she described this development in more detail. She wrote:

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling

instead of thought, and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention (p. 479)

The issue of religion bled dry of its content is the feature of what is probably the most famous story about Flannery O'Connor. As a very young and unknown writer she was visiting New York and was taken to a party at the home of Mary McCarthy, ex-Catholic and ex-believer, a sophisticated and accomplished novelist, essayist and critic. What follows is O'Connor's description of the encounter: "We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing in such company for me to say...Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward the morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater [Mary McCarthy] said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the most 'portable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of." Paul Elie remarks of this exchange: "The closing remark is the most famous of all O'Connor's remarks, an economical swipe at the reductive, liberalizing view of religion."

She even locates one important moment in the development of this religious trend in this country. With some amusement she recalls a talk she gave at a college:

I told them that when Emerson decided in 1832 that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, that an important step in the vaporization of religion in American had taken place. (p. 511)

For some readers one of the most surprising, even jarring, features of O'Connor's fiction, is its consistently comic character, even as the stories and novels pursue such serious themes of faith and grace. Paul Elie describes an experience the author had when in New York, on a visit to the Cloisters (the museum of medieval art in Fort Tryon Park): "She was 'greatly taken' with a wooden statue on display in one of the chapels. 'It was the Virgin holding the Christ child and both were laughing; not smiling, laughing.' Elie concludes: "It was a piece to emulate as well as admire; like her own work, it was religious and comic at the

same time."

The betrayal of religion is downright diabolical in Flannery O'Connor's view, and so it is portrayed in her fiction. For her, the crucial choice facing each of us is between the "lost" life with Christ and the worldly "saved" life without him. Thus, the most fiendish of temptation is to offer a saved, worldly life, but to offer it under the guise of being generically "Christian" (though with no Christ content whatsoever.)

In this connection Paul Elie describes a type of character that appears over and over again in O'Connor's stories: "the middle-aged busybody who knows exactly what she thinks, who sees all and understands nothing." One example is the character of Mrs. May, in the story "Greenleaf". At one point in the story, Mrs. May comes upon Mrs. Greenleaf in the woods, murmuring over and over again, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." O'Connor wrote: "Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building, like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true."⁴

As I close these remarks on what Flannery O'Connor has to say to the Church about faith, modern consciousness, and living together as Church, I think of her simple statement: "I write because I write well." We are here this afternoon because we all agree with her, and her works live because multitudes, who are not here, agree with us. She writes well. But there is so much more than that to be said of her. One thing will suffice for me now: How wonderfully different Flannery O'Connor was from Mrs. May. She thought that the name of Jesus, the reality of Jesus, belonged everywhere, indeed, was everywhere. And about the Christian faith Flannery O'Connor was the polar opposite of Mrs. May, because she, of course, believed all of it was true.

¹ Flannery O'Connor, Habit of Being, Letters Edited And With An Introduction by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Favor, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p. 474.

² Cited by William Barry, S.J., in "The Kingdom of God and Discernment" (America, Vol., 57, No.7, September 26, 1987), p. 159.

³ Eliot, Thomas Stearns, Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 106.

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, The Complete Stories (New York: Ferrer, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 316.