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When Things That Someday Converged First Arose

Ken Briggs | Sep. 13, 2013 NCR Today

A sampling of prayers from the emerging Flannery O'Connor graces the New Yorker magazine's Sept. 19 issue with bitter-sweet poignancy.

The free style supplications, entered into a notebook during her time at the Iowa Writers' Worship starting when she was 20, largely reflect the public image of O'Connor as a solitary artist of immense talent and ardent faith. But they also glimpse a fragility of self and conviction that mirror the unsteady gait of a girl entering upon the struggles that she will share with adult believers whether they show it or not.

"I dread, oh Lord, losing my faith," she confesses. "My mind isn't strong. It is prey to all sorts of intellectual quackery. It do not want it to be fear which keeps me in the Church."

She wants "very much to succeed" but censures herself for selfishness. Her ambition intertwines with a belief that authorship belongs to God rather than herself. "Don't let me ever think, dear God, that I was anything but the instrument for Your story -- just like the typewriter was mine."

But the inexorable struggle between Self and Ultimate Selflessness, which occupies artists of faith often to the point of distraction, weaves through O'Connor's prayers.

Her extraordinary sensibility and precociousness are also on view. Even as a young, relatively isolated Southerner, she felt the encroaching secularism that challenged her faith. Of the bedrock Faith, Hope and Charity elements, faith "gives me the most mental pain" because "At every point in this educational process, we are told that it is ridiculous and the arguments sound so good it is hard not to fall into them.

Even this limited selection of her early life reveal the tenacity that would keep her within the fold as a Catholic who isn't easily categorized. From the prayers, the image is one of a Catholic aesthete without community and an uncritical communicant (though she deftly corrects a monsignor's homily); her personal life shows a tough critic who faults herself for among other things badmouthing other people because it makes her "feel clever"; her fiction portrays her as richly absorbed in the real and surreal worlds. Her life was brief and her art brilliant. These prayers only add to the rich mosaic she left behind.

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