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by Melinda Henneberger

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November 21, 2019

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It mostly felt good to be back at home, even though I don't live there anymore.

Michael Murphy, who organized this fall's Catholic Imagination Conference on the future of the Catholic literary tradition at Loyola University Chicago's Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage, admitted that when he invited me to moderate a panel at this high-level confab, he sort of hoped it might feel like a broader invitation. A reminder that the light was still on and the key still under the mat if I ever wanted back in.

Which I do, not infrequently, a year after leaving the church over its long, loving coddling of child abusers. I can't tell you how *annoying* I find that involuntary little heart-skip of "Oh, there you are" — a tingle, not a twinge — every time I pass an Our Lady of … It feels like a lifetime since I took Communion, and when Notre Dame was on fire I had the most ridiculous urge to run inside, metaphorically speaking.. The conference in Chicago was three days of this — the warm, the wise and the worrisome.

Tobias Wolff read some funny pages from the novel he's working on, about his main character's discovery that naming his sins might not always get him three Hail Marys, a clean conscience and a sloppy hug. That out in the world, it's not always true that "the worse the sin, the bigger the bash" at the sight of your prodigal self.

Dana Gioia talked about the necessity of reconnecting the church with beauty: "If anyone is going to do it, it's going to be us." And Paul Schrader explained "the pathology of suicidal glory" in his movie "First Reformed."

Not everything was provocative in a good way, of course.

Richard Rodriguez got a big ovation when he said that he'd brought his husband with him, and the crowd felt so good about this that I'm not sure how many others heard what I did in his comparison of priests accused of sex abuse to Graham Greene's "whiskey priest" in *The Power and the Glory*.

"We don't know their stories," Rodriguez said of these "fallen" men. "What do they think they were doing? … We have no idea who they were, or what they suffered. … Our imaginations have gone dull," so "we know nothing about the bodies of the fallen priests."

Sure, because we've only spent the last who knows how many centuries worrying about poor Father So-and-So's tortured inner life, when we should have been worrying about the literal torture of his prey. As I told Rodriguez in the hall later, on this one issue he might have more in common with the hierarchy than he thinks.

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The highlight of the conference for me was Alice McDermott's dazzlingly simple explanation of why she's still more in than out, more days than not. She began with a story I remember reading in The Washington Post some years ago, about a young boy on a family outing to the park who was struck by a tree limb during a sudden thunderstorm.

"It was the father who reached the child first, and he saw immediately that although the boy's body was moving, the blow was fatal," McDermott said. "As his wife called 911, the father held his dying, struggling child in his arms. There was nothing else to do, he told the Metro reporter, but to whisper, 'Go to Jesus, son,' as the boy died in his arms."

"I found myself recalling this," McDermott said, "whenever asked to discuss or defend my faith, or that of the characters I invent. I think of it, too, whenever impatience seems to be the deepest emotion I can muster in regard to the current state of the Catholic Church." Because somehow, "I can't shake the conviction that nothing in the complex and often terrible — and I'm tempted to say increasingly terrible — 2000-plus year history of Christianity, nothing — no failings, no cruelty, no human error, no evil — can diminish the value, the grace, the immeasurable beauty of the words spoken by the father as he held his dying child. 'Go to Jesus, son.' Words hurled against the meaninglessness, the suffering, the sudden and terrible transformation of that ordinary afternoon."

So that when pressed about how, oh how, she can even try to remain hopeful about this wounded church, "I recall this single incident and I hear myself asking, in the accent of my Long Island youth, 'What else ya got?' What else have you got that can reconcile the cruelty of our mortal condition with the depth and complexity of our love for one another even just once?"

Any non-believer hearing this would blink and back away slowly. But to us, it makes complete sense, and is in fact so obviously true that even the contentious crew on Catholic Twitter might just nod and keep moving.

Jesus isn't only for those in the Catholic Church, of course, but it's the address I have for him. A couple things I have learned this last year: I'm not going to become an Episcopalian, or anything else, for one thing because Catholicism gives you a whole way of looking at the world, seen and unseen, that it's far too late to repeal and replace.

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Recently, after a University of Notre Dame classmate died unexpectedly, a friend who served as a pallbearer sent a bunch of us who had studied together in France a photo of the bald eagle that had improbably shown up outside the church where his funeral Mass was held in Portland, Oregon.

Joe sent that photo knowing that to those of us who see meaning in such things, and signs everywhere, this was not a random fly-by, but a source of comfort.

So, never mind and make room in the pew? Not quite. I laughed pretty hard, I have to admit, when I recently read in NCR that "at the very moment last week when Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin was asked about the state of the McCarrick investigation, a brief earthquake shook Rome."

But on abuse, I'm waiting not so much for a sign as for some tangible evidence of the reform that I keep hearing is really, really happening this time.

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