

April 17, 2006

Joseph Bottum writes:

It's common among Catholic commentators to look back on the era from the late 1930s to the early 1960s and see a great time of conversions in America and England. There was something in the air that was drawing secularly important or promising people to the Church. The list is well known, and you can read about it in memoirs by everyone from Avery Dulles to Alec Guinness. The best place in which to recapture the *feeling* of those days may be the undergraduate correspondence of Thomas Merton and the poet Robert Lax. For very young men, pretentious and precocious, there was something alluring about Catholicism at that moment, and what that something is deserves investigation.

Now, it's not quite as common among Catholic commentators to look back on the 1990s and see another great era of conversions, but I think future generations will name it so. Again, the list is well known, and, again, there was something in the air that seemed to be luring people to become papists and mackerel-snappers.

One could speak here about the extent to which the priest scandals brought to an end that 1990s run of conversions. In 2003, a young man in Washington told me he felt increasingly drawn to Catholicism, and so I introduced him to some Catholics I thought would help—only to have Kate O'Beirne say to him, "Well, nobody can accuse you of being an opportunist."

But what may be more interesting is the difference between the allure of Catholicism in the 1940s and 1950s, and the allure of Catholicism in the 1990s—for somewhere in that difference lies the explanation for the nearly complete non-existence of Catholic art and Catholic literature at this moment.

Some of it, of course, is the loss of tribal feeling. At a recent Catholic dinner, I heard the name of Ralph McInerny—and I thought to myself that there was a time when Irish names would not have been pronounced incorrectly at an American Catholic gathering. But it wasn't exactly tribalism that kept Flannery O'Connor a Catholic or made Muriel Spark think she had to turn to Catholicism to find something missing in her self-portrait of the artist as a young woman.

So what was it? It's routine to talk about aesthetics here, and the loss of Catholic aesthetics after Vatican II. And there's something to that. Wherever two or three liturgists are gathered together, mischief is being done. Ages of purgatory are going to be used up by the people responsible for the cathedral in Los Angeles. And certainly it's true that the converts of the 1990s were not being drawn to the Mass by its beauty—which may be the explanation for why they were not artists. I'm glad Larry Kudlow came into the Church, and Robert Novak, and many others. But they are not exactly like the converts of an earlier era.

And yet, aesthetics is not a sufficient explanation for earlier Catholic moments. John Henry Newman speaks of the *loss* of beauty he experienced in moving from the high Anglican world to the Catholic in the 1840s. The same 1950s that saw Robert Lowell's hunt for beauty in *Lord Weary's Castle* also saw the construction of that concrete monstrosity of a cathedral up Charles Street in Baltimore.

Robert Lowell is, in fact, a good case study. It wasn't an aesthetics the young convert Lowell needed for his

poetry; he had plenty of his own. And it wasn't a morality; to read Ian Hamilton's biography is to realize that Lowell wouldn't know an ethics if it whacked him upside the head. What he needed was a metaphysics, an ontology, a thickening of the world by a meaning that lies outside the world. What he needed was a *cosmology*—a cosmology of sufficient intellectual coherence that it could inform a serious art, and sufficient social force that it could inform a popular art. He needed structure and he needed readers, and he thought that he could find them both by becoming a Catholic.

In this artistic desire for a cosmology, I think that we can see something that Catholicism is not giving much these days. Except for an op-ed in the *New York Times* by Cardinal Dulles, there was almost nothing in the mainstream press during the news cycles about the priest scandals that referred to the principle on which Graham Greene and Malcolm Lowry once built entire novels—namely, “Once a priest, always a priest.” The spiritual life through the 1990s was seen primarily through a lens of ethics rather than a lens of metaphysics. And where we once got public Catholicism as high artistry, we have it more recently perceived in the public eye as something like the intellectual wing of the Republican party at prayer.

Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing. But it ought to send us back to think about that moment around 1962 or 1963 when Catholicism looked ready to take over the highbrow world. Major book awards had gone to the likes of J.F. Powers, and Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy, and Jean Stafford. Seriousness was all on the side of Catholics. Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson were recognized names. Even popular fiction had Morris West's bestsellers. Mystery magazines were filled with Catholic stories. There was something in the air—and within five years, it had all been swept away.

Ralph McInerny, Mary Gordon, maybe Garry Wills, are the only survivors of that era, and it would be worth interrogating them about what happened—the change that McInerny struggled against, and Gordon celebrated, and Wills was mildly wistful about in *Bare Ruined Choirs* and seems to think didn't go far enough in his latest books.

The contemporary Catholic authors I admire—from Oscar Hijuelos to Richard Dooling and Alice McDermott—all seem *incidentally* Catholic. They are writers who happen to be Catholic, which no doubt informs their work in important and interesting ways. But that is not exactly how one would describe Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy. A primary task that lies before those interested in Catholic art is the sorting out of what created the great moment of American Catholic literature in the early 1960s, what destroyed it—and what failed to bring us anything comparable in the 1990s.