Did Catholicism Give America Its Crucial Theme?

Three theses, in ascending order (this being an essay about Catholic matters):

First: among the finest writers in American history, past and present, are a startling number of Catholic men and women – more than we imagined.

Second: among the American writers who had substantive political and social impacts and influence on the culture wars are a startling number of Catholic men and women – more than we imagined.

Third: among American Catholicism’s greatest accomplishments (along with the school system, and perfecting college football, and hatching Dorothy Day) is the influence of Catholic theme, message, motif, narrative, language, and character on American literature and culture – much more than we ever imagined.

And when I add up all three theses, when I stack them one on another and note their collective stunning weight – I arrive at this amazing conclusion: Catholicism, which is about to celebrate the 500th anniversary of its arrival in what are today these United States, not only substantively influenced, but actually shaped, formed, and provided crucial narrative focus to the continuing brave and creative and tumultuous idea that is this nation. If we think of America as a story, as a continuing tale, I think we can say, gaping, that the story is undeniably shaped by the Catholic genius; that the American story is remarkably Catholic in nature, character, motif, and ambition.

That’s an incredible thing to say. But hear me out...

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Among the finest current writers in America, by any measure: Barry Lopez, Annie Dillard, Alice McDermott, Mary Gordon, Ron Hansen. Among the finest
late writers in America, by any measure: Flannery O’Connor, J.F. Powers, Andre Dubus, Tony Hillerman, Walker Percy, Edwin O’Connor. Among the writers with interesting political or social influence on American culture: William F. Buckley, Scott Fitzgerald, Jack Kerouac, Frank McCourt, F.X. Toole (whose book *Rope Burns* became the movie *Million Dollar Baby*), and Bruce Springsteen, if we consider him for a moment, as we should, as a subtle composer of stories and poems set to music. Each and every one Catholic; each and every one informed and influenced by Catholic themes and symbols; each and every one interested in “the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace,” as Flannery O’Connor noted – “the moment in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected.”

Their work has won the nation’s highest literary awards, collectively sold millions of copies, been made into popular movies seen by many millions of people, been read and seen and heard as American cultural product by people all over the world. Choose any one of the above, and stare at him or her in the light of the Catholic story of resurrected hope, of the puzzling revolutionary on a lonely road, of the doomed hero who refuses to retract his difficult and unreasonable message even when facing death as the cost of its promulgation, of the quiet man sacrificed for those he loved in his time and forever after, of courage beyond sense and logic, of irrepressible faith in what might be rather than what so bloodily is, and what we have taken to be the American character and message and vision begins to sound eerily like the ancient Catholic character and message and vision, as countercultural now as it was in the beginning. Both are literally against the prevailing cultures of their times – both relegating class and royal birth to the dustbin of history; both insisting on the freedom of conscience and possibility of the individual; both tossing aside filters and middlemen between individual and the apex of joy; both sworn to interindependence and community as pillars and helpmeets for the dusty road; both leery of
worldly authority, fascinated by creativity and laughter as crucial tools and hallmarks; both insisting on the primacy of children at the heart of it all; both famous worldwide for cheerful and selfless service to others, especially in times and regions of war, unrest, and tumult. Both have been, in their time, arguably the most influential and powerful polity on earth; both are known worldwide for their common cloth, black and white in one case and blue denim in the other; and both, it is a pleasure and a pain to say, still in headlong pursuit of what they might be at their best, what they might be if ever they become what they have long said they wish to be; the nation indeed a common cause, and not a country of arrogant rich and seething poor, not a country quick to inflict death on its enemies, not a country that annually murders more than a million of its smallest citizens; the religion indeed a common cause, and not a polity of arrogant men and seething women, not a polity quick to hide and cover rapists in its midst, not a polity so often ignoring the very social justice efforts its founder insisted on, in terms so blunt and terse they have lasted two thousand years to ring more loudly now than ever before.

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Think: can we say of such a deeply conservative and hugely influential writer as William Frank Buckley, for example, that his deeply religious awareness of the holiness of what is, of creation, fed his literally conserving instinct? Fed his constant and consistent witty attacking of ‘received wisdom’? Fed his enduring suspicion of all programs and projects that gave power to the state and not to the individual? Can we say of Frank McCourt’s masterpiece of courage and mercy and grace against a roaring tide of despair and poverty and cruelty, Angela’s Ashes, that it is a story of forgiveness beyond the bounds of sense – Christ’s exact message? Can we say of Toole’s book that it is not about boxing as much as it is about moral choices, about the place in your heart where you would you sacrifice your soul for someone you love?
Can we say of Kerouac’s best book (*Visions of Gerard*), that it is about a saint, and that his better books, *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, are Christ stories, the holy fools on the road? Can we say of Edwin O’Connor’s great *The Edge of Sadness*, that it is a superb tale of the thorniness of grace, its unpleasant and unexpected and sometimes painful arrival, a tale of hope rising against all evidence and sense? Even Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – the greatest American novel of all, in my estimation – stars a god/man, a hero no one really knows, an object of adoration and misapprehension, a hero who confuses with his simplicity, with his ultimate lack of heroism – is there not a Christ flavor in this? “He had one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced, or seemed to face, the whole external world for an instant and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself...” And that extraordinary ending: “Gatsby believed in the... future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And then one fine morning....”

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The enigmatic hero on the road. The crazily brave individual against the Empire, the Machine, the Boss, the State, the Man. The amazing resurrection of the hero from certain death, destruction, obliteration. The courage of the individual beyond measure, reason, logic, understanding. Are these not finally Catholic narratives?  

Think: if we say that Americaanness, the vital aspects of what we believe sets us apart from other countries and their ambitions, identifies our own peculiar and particular nature as a people, then we are talking about things like the incredible unbelievable comeback, the shocking resurrection
from total disaster, the underdog sailing forth against all odds to defeat the bully and oppressor, the possibility that everyone no matter how poor or small or weak can be a hero, the brave individual stalwart and calm against trouble, and the particularly American idea of transcendental immediacy, the miracle of the moment, the mystic thread of American secular spirituality that runs from Thoreau to the tremendous burst of ‘nature writing’ best exemplified by Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez. Are those not, each and every one, Catholic ideas and stories?

Americanness, in the end, is an unbelievable idea. It’s never been done before. We have not done it especially well. For all the great things we have done – and we have been the leading edge of saving the world from slavery, and we invented poker, basketball, coffee pots, elevators, peanut butter, maple syrup, Mark Twain, jazz, and the bra as we know and love it today, not to mention the weekend, the Ferris Wheel, electric guitars, bifocals, dental floss, crayons, and basically the computer – we also invented napalm and the nuclear warhead, and we have been a shockingly violent country, addicted to lies and illusions; a huge teenager of a country, powerful and energetic and imaginative but not sometimes very kind or thoughtful or reflective; but we are possible still more than any other country, I think – blessed with water and land and resource and space and imagination, blessed with creativity and energy and peace and safety and education, blessed more than any country ever, maybe, with possibility on the largest scale in human history.

We can still go somewhere, as a people, a nation, a country, an idea, that has never been done before.

We are still an idea that has to do with the death of violence, the rise of laughter as prayer and weapon, the commitment to creativity, the commitment to inventiveness and innovation, the commitment to the holiness of water and air and dirt, the commitment not to power but to
power’s beneficial effect, the commitment to children as the actual treasures in our society rather than chimera to whom we pay lip service but let starve and die, the commitment, finally, to love.

We are still capable of the America that we dream of, the America that both parties and all parties in the end envision as a destination achievable by radically different roads; and that America is, in a real sense, a Catholic America. Not because everyone’s Catholic – that would be unhealthy, and something out of the cruel and selfish dreams of a bin Laden, as totalitarian and frightened a man as ever lived – but because the idea of that America is in many ways the Catholic genius spoken in national terms – not political, but imaginative, lived, esteemed, valued, practiced – a nation infused by the Catholic genius, not defined by it.

A nation in which war is past tense.

A nation in which the little children do not suffer, but are held in the light of all.

A nation that has foresworn murder in all its forms and devoted itself to the seamless garment – to the seethe of life – that has committed itself to life and devoted its extraordinary powers intellectually culturally educationally to seeing how we can accommodate life while respecting and reverencing the holiness of creation. Can we, for example, lead the way into the stars? Why not us?

A nation in which the word conservative is finally taken to mean actually conserving that which was given to us – so that conservatives are the most adamant and articulate voices for clean air, clean water, clean dirt, clean food, clean government, great education, safety nets for the poor and broken and helpless, who are our brothers and sisters.

A nation that not only strives but insists on the illogical, unreasonable, nonsensical conviction that love defeats hate, light defeats darkness, hope defeats despair.
A nation that is the first in history to harness all its incredible tools and powers, the cheerful independent streak of its people, their courage and creativity, their inventiveness and sticktoittiveness, their distaste for authority and bullies, their belief in personal independence set in communal interdependence like a jewels,

And does not grab for power, does not enslave others, does not steal all the money, does not impose its will and culture, does not invent some cruel and silly excuse for power like the Aryan race is the only one that matters, or everyone should be Muslim, or, let us not forget, that everyone should be Catholic, which we tried once, and thank God failed to accomplish.

The America that we can be: I suggest that it is an America of wild hope, of words made flesh, of light and laughter and love.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In the beginning there was a dream of America, and the dream was a wild and holy one of a country unlike any that ever was, and the dream is still possible, still within our grasp,

And the way it may be grasped, I suspect, is through story – stories as agents of the future – as lodestars and compass points – as beacons of light ahead in the murk – as signposts – as languages we may one day speak fluently –

And I suggest finally that Catholic writers and writing may well be not only immensely powerful stories of what we can be, but perhaps dimly the very directions there: Flannery O’Connor’s insistence on the holiness of brokenness; Annie Dillard’s insistence on the holiness of the moment; Barry Lopez’s insistence that communities are best built of love and reverence and responsibility; Andre Dubus’s insistence that we feed others with the very essence of ourselves, that we are the eucharist; Merton’s insistence that we are brothers and sisters and companions and soulmates with the other
religions and what a great world it would be if we walked together – I remind you that this was one of JP2’s dreams, and who will argue with a Polish playwright?

We can do it. We will do it. I am absolutely convinced that it can happen. But it will only happen with brilliant seeds scattered in us all to flower as they will; and it seems to me that America’s Catholic writers and storytellers have scattered those seeds more widely and thoroughly and wildly than any other writers we have had, for which I am grateful, delighted, hopeful, and finished with this sermon. Go in peace to love and serve the Light.

Brian Doyle

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