

ABSTRACT

REYNOLDS, MORGEN PINNOCK. *The Evangelical Catholic: Flannery O'Connor as a Catholic Writer in the Protestant South.* (Under the direction of Lucinda MacKethan)

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the theology of Flannery O'Connor and her unique identity as a Catholic writer in the Protestant South. She was a devout member of the Catholic minority, but the Evangelical atmosphere colored her writing and influenced the theology of her characters and her themes. I examine three different areas where Protestants and Catholics have traditionally clashed and demonstrate how O'Connor utilizes tenets of both religions to communicate her themes. First, in "The River," "Greenleaf," and "The Enduring Chill," I look at the Sacraments and O'Connor's respect for their necessity while also recognizing her perspective on the necessity of the Spirit to make them viable. Next I examine the argument of Grace versus works in "Good Country People" and "Revelation." While the Catholic O'Connor values works as paramount in earning salvation, she also respects the Protestant reliance on God's grace. Finally, in "Parker's Back" I study the marriage of Sarah Ruth and O.E. Parker as a symbol of a "marriage" between Protestants and Catholics, uniting their views of revelation utilizing body and spirit and image and word. In examining these stories, Flannery O'Connor emerges as a writer that finds a common ground between theologies at odds for centuries. She demonstrates that there are truths in both religions that are equally necessary in a personal pilgrimage to Christ.

**THE EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC: FLANNERY O'CONNOR AS A CATHOLIC
WRITER IN THE PROTESTANT SOUTH**

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Morgen Pinnock Reynolds was born November 9, 1977 in Hope Mills, NC. Her family lived in Panama for four years shortly after she was born but then returned to North Carolina where she attended Union Pines High School, graduating in 1995 as valedictorian. She attended Brigham Young University in Provo UT, then transferred to Southern Virginia College when offered a leadership scholarship to the newly established college. It was there that she changed her major to English and graduated in 2001. Morgen had a busy year in 2002, marrying Daman Reynolds and beginning the Masters Program at North Carolina State University. From the beginning of the program, she has been intrigued by Flannery O'Connor and the religiosity of her fiction. The Masters program culminates both with this thesis and with the birth of her son, Isaac, born February 1st, 2004. He is a central element in Morgen's future plans. She plans to stay at home and pursue motherhood and freelance writing, in that order.

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I extend my gratitude to my mother, Lucretia Pinnock, who believes me capable of anything. Her confidence inspires me both to aspire and achieve. Above all, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Daman Reynolds. Not a page of it would have been possible without his loving support. He made me a mother, and cared for our son when I needed to don the hat of Graduate student. He has proofread papers and listened as I read aloud. This thesis is as much his as it is mine.

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INTRODUCTION

In a letter to Andrew Lytle, Flannery O'Connor made a now famous synopsis of her unique writing niche, or lack thereof, when she wrote: "To my way of thinking, the only thing that keeps me from being a regional writer is being a Catholic, and the only thing that keeps me from being a Catholic writer (in the narrow sense) is being a Southerner" (*Being* 104). She herself recognized the dichotomy of her situation as both Southern and a Catholic, yet also acknowledged that this same dichotomy contributed to her writing. In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," she alludes to her duality when she writes that "the two circumstances that have given character to my own writing have been those of being Southern and being Catholic" (196). The South has historically been an area dominated by Evangelical Protestantism in its religious orientation, while the Catholic voice has never been a common one amidst southern revivals--or the Junior League. Thus O'Connor's Southern upbringing was defined not just by the general tendencies of Southern culture, but specifically by the heated climate of Southern Evangelical religion. As a devout Catholic reveling in the tradition and tragedy of the Protestant South, O'Connor was herself caught in a fascinating intersection, and the effects of the overlap are evident in her layered writing. As to which of these influences sculpted her vision more, her Catholic roots or Evangelical Southern upbringing, both sides of the coin have their champions. She was definitely Catholic and often said herself that her faith was of paramount importance to her creativity. Some scholars have written about her as a "pure" Catholic writer, so deeply entrenched in the doctrine of Catholicism

that her writing leaves little room for any other theology. Robert Brinkmeyer is a member of this camp, citing O'Connor herself when she wrote, "I feel that if I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason to ever feel horrified or even to enjoy anything. I am born Catholic, went to Catholic schools in my early years, and have never left or wanted to leave the Church" (114). Her Catholic dedication is clear; however, some scholars emphasize the credit she gave to her surroundings, recognizing that the zeal and color of the Evangelical South had its own part in her creative genesis. Ross Labrie recognizes the Evangelical influence in O'Connor, noting that she admitted her imagination was "molded" by a "culture that was traditionally Protestant" (2); He says that she regarded her "region's Protestant culture as fortuitous, arguing that her contact with evangelical Protestantism provided her with a more concrete and experiential understanding of religion than had been the case with the abstract and somewhat legalistic Catholicism that had come down to her, virtually abstract, from the sixteenth-century Council of Trent" (1-2). Both religions have a special place in the heart of Flannery O'Connor. She deems elements of both as sincere and necessary. Indeed, the two religions that have battled from pulpits for ages find a place of reunion and refuge in one open-minded Georgian writer.

That her Catholicism had a profound effect on O'Connor's perspective on writing and the world is clear from her comment in a letter to John Lynch: "being a Catholic has saved [her] a couple of thousand years in learning to write" (*Habit* 114). The omniscience of the Catholic faith lent her boldness and confidence in writing and in faith. The Catholic Church maintains itself as the one path and the one Church for all those seeking God. *The Church Teaches*, a collection of documents and declarations of the

Catholic Church, declares the omnipotence of the religion: “Such is the Church of Christ which endures through all the ages one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic. It is always unchanged in its essence; yet it always accommodates itself to the variety of times and conditions in which it lives, so that it can effectively be what it truly is, the unique and necessary ark of salvation *for all*” (67-8, italics added). The Church is confident in their role as *the* Church of Christ and the vehicle for salvation. This confidence is a force that both unites the Catholics to each other and tends to alienate them from the rest of the world. Catholics trust their grasp of Truth and are certain that any problem that arises can be resolved in their theology. This perspective affects politicians, intellectuals, and writers, imbuing them with the confidence in their ability to attack big problems and solve them with the comfort of Catholic omniscience behind them. With such a powerful religion, bolstered by Sacraments, Latin, and a bevy of Saints and martyrs, it is little wonder that Catholic American writers at the time could utilize their religion to unite themselves to one another and to an audience. O’Connor felt the urgency of spreading the Catholic religion to areas where it may not have been found earlier. In “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South,” she discusses her drive to write as a Catholic artist: “I am concerned that future Catholics have a literature. I want them to have a literature that will be undeniably theirs, but which will also be understood and cherished by the rest of our countrymen” (192). She was stirred by the same desire to use Catholicism to touch the rest of society and bring them closer to the Roman Catholic idea of Truth. In this sense, her Catholicism was Evangelical in nature--a fitting characteristic for one living in the Evangelical south.

In Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis Charles Reagan Wilson outlines five main characteristics of “southern religious distinctiveness”: Protestant dominance, evangelical nature, fundamentalism, moralism, and expressiveness (7-11). There are several different denominations covered by the Protestant umbrella. Wilson concedes that “significant differences existed between the Presbyterian Church . . ., the southern Baptists and the Methodists, black Methodists and white Methodists, and all of the above have differed from the Fire Baptized Holiness Church members” (7). There are some Protestant faiths that resemble more closely the Catholic Church from which they sprung while others spurn the ornamental Catholic tendencies and adhere to a basic and fundamentalist Christianity. However, as Wilson explains, “beneath these differences is a broad, interdenominational tradition of shared Protestantism” (7-8). This “shared Protestantism” permits one to speak of Protestantism in my thesis without differentiating between the varied denominations. The Evangelicals of the South are the group which find the most resonance with O’Connor. Evangelicals, as Wilson points out, are centered on “conversion, and proselytizing becomes not one aspect of religion but the central concern of individuals and the church as a community.” The Protestants’ evangelical nature centers on one “saving moment of religious revelation from which the convert can date the real beginnings of the Christian life” (8). A dramatic conversion is a common characteristic in O’Connor’s fiction, usually one involving death and enlightenment simultaneously. The fundamentalists are a stricter sort, “demanding affirmation of an identifiable creed” (9). The behavior after the revelation is not as crucial to O’Connor, but her writing reflects the perspective that the degree of one’s sincere conversion is reflected by his or her works and Christlike behavior. One’s

behavior is a key element in both Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism, and “Protestantism” in the following chapters refers to the general Protestantism to which Wilson refers--a Protestantism that embraces both Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. The expressiveness of Protestantism is especially apparent in O'Connor. The wild and raucous Fundamentalist worship sharply contrasted with the sophistication of a Catholic mass. This exuberant worship was what endeared Flannery O'Connor to the South. O'Connor's affinity for the Evangelical South is reflected by her declaration that she felt a “good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists’ than she did with mainstream Protestants or Catholics for whom the supernatural had become an ‘embarrassment’ and for whom religion had become a ‘department of sociology or culture or personality development” (Labrie 211). While she felt a kinship with the Catholics spreading the message, the individual and rustic Southern Evangelicals held her in their grip as well. As a writer, O'Connor was a purveyor of the Catholic faith itself, spreading its doctrines of Sacraments and order. However, the passionate rhetoric of the Southern preachers also reached her ears.

The religious elements that influenced into her writing, however, still come second to her storytelling. This is not to claim that O'Connor used her fiction as a vehicle to outline the doctrines of Catholicism or indoctrinate Catholics with the ideals of Evangelicalism. Her stories consisted of personal conversions and interactions with the Spirit, not doctrinal instruction. Flannery O'Connor was not writing stories and trying to decide if she was Catholic or Protestant. Her Catholicism is inarguable, but in her writing, there are windows of Evangelicalism that enlighten her characters and carry them further in their pilgrimage to Christ. This thesis examines three areas where these

moments occur, where both religions contribute to her message. The first chapter will center on the Sacraments, an age-old theological impasse between Catholicism and Protestantism. O'Connor respected the order and necessity of the Sacraments in her life and in her writing; however, her characters demonstrate a streak of individualism in that seems to fly in the face of the need of such pomp and circumstance. One of the divergences between Catholics and Protestants centers on the need of intercession between God and man and the Sacraments are a point where that argument is fleshed out—especially in “The River,” “Greenleaf,” and “The Enduring Chill.” In “The River” the Sacrament of Baptism is pivotal and reflects some of O'Connor's sentiments about the ordinance. “Greenleaf” evinces O'Connor's support of individual, rugged faith while downplaying the order and decorum that the Sacraments imply. “The Enduring Chill” presents a parody of the catechism and an instructive interaction with the Holy Ghost. Through these stories Flannery O'Connor emerges as one who respects the need for Sacramental order but also recognizes the impotence of the order if it is not accompanied by an individual faith. A difference also emerges between a merely violent conversion, and one that will truly endure.

The second chapter examines how O'Connor deals with the controversy of grace versus works. While participating in the Sacraments and good works is crucial to Catholics in the process of salvation, Evangelists hold to the doctrine of salvation only by grace, claiming that in the end nothing that a mere mortal does has the power to earn salvation. O'Connor's stories demonstrate that she values both works and grace in the process of redemption. They also serve as warnings against the inherent pride that arises if only one is focused on. Hulga in “Good Country People” is a vivid example of

O'Connor's Evangelical distaste for those that ignore the divine and its omnipotent salvation in favor of the value of their own works. "Revelation," however, demonstrates her Catholic distaste for those that ignore the importance of their Christian behavior and not just their election. Here, the homely Mary Grace brings the comfortably stationed Ruby Turpin to a saving revelation. Though "Grace" still plays a major Evangelical role in the story, here O'Connor uses Ruby to battle the Protestant idea that being blessed with social grace, prominence, and affluence equate election. These two stories reflect the importance of *both* grace and works, warning against the pride that surfaces when only one of them becomes the exclusive focus.

The final chapter of the thesis focuses attention on one of O'Connor's final stories, "Parker's Back," which considers the doctrinal differences concerning the body. While the Catholics see the body and spirit as inseparable tools of teaching, the Evangelical Protestants traditionally see the body as something to overcome and disdain. O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker, who represent the two different ideologies themselves, embody this difference. While O.E. is obsessed with his body, Sarah Ruth scorns it. In looking at Parker's body specifically, we can also mark the contrast between visual revelation and revelation based in texts. Catholicism is a visual religion. The proliferation of art and the depiction of Saints in the Church make this clear. Evangelical Bible-beating Protestants, however, focus on the written word. This doctrinal difference harkens back to one of the original issues of dissension between the two theologies. The Reformation was largely due to Protestant desires to cling to the Word, interpreting it individually and correctly. The different perspectives on the body and the spirit and the visual versus the written find expression in Sarah Ruth and Obadiah Elihue Parker. Their unlikely

marriage creates an arena where O'Connor demonstrates the validity of both sides and their need for each other in a true pilgrimage to Christ.

Flannery O'Connor captured elements of two very different worlds and merged them to tutor her readers in how to journey to a true and sincere conversion. Her stories cannot be dissected as doctrinal explanation; as she warned: "I think you folks sometimes strain the soup too thin" (*Habit* 582). She simply wrote about people journeying to truth and to Christ. In the stories her Catholic faith met with her Evangelical fervor and together they teach her readers about the necessity of sincere conversion and fiery faith in a personal pilgrimage, be it Catholic or Protestant.

CHAPTER ONE

The Order of Conversion and the Sacraments

Central to the Protestant Reformation was the controversy about the Sacraments. The Catholics insisted that all seven are necessary to Salvation, while the Protestants spurned five of the seven, deeming them as merely symbolic signs of election, not as literal vehicles of sanctification. The Sacraments and the literal power to save with which they are invested shape the perspective of any Catholic, writer or not. Flannery O'Connor recognized that Catholics look at the world through a Sacramental lens, and claimed that "the Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction of any depth" (*Manners* 152). To O'Connor the "sacramental view" inspired creativity and order. The Sacraments themselves gave order to the process of Salvation and defined certain ordinances and expectations that O'Connor thoroughly respected. However, in her writing, there was also a hint of animosity towards those who would make religion too orderly. She believed in the order of the Sacraments and in their ability to confer grace, but the power to accept the offered grace rested with the individual and his or her personal conversion. It is the individual and personal dramatic witness and conversion that invests the Sacraments with power, not the Sacraments themselves. Her stories are replete with wild characters living outside the boundaries of organized religion, and she demonstrates a healthy respect for their personal relationship with God. While her view may be Catholic and Sacramental, her ideas about how one actually arrives at God and Salvation reflect some principles inherent to Southern Protestant Evangelicalism.

As explained in *The Church Teaches*, Catholics view the Sacraments as the essential pathway to communication with the divine:

When the Word was made flesh and dwelt in our midst, the mysterious, invisible life of God took visible form in this material world of human life. The paradoxical union of the divine with the human, the invisible with the visible, that characterized the Incarnation of the Word, continues in the Church in which the divine person of Christ lives on in mysterious union with the visible, external society, the mystical body, of which he, as man, is the head. The sacramental system of the Church is an extension of this same divine plan. In the seven sacraments¹ Christ communicates the divine life to the members of his Church through visible, external signs which he instituted for this purpose . . . Each of the sacraments confers or increases sanctifying grace. This sanctifying grace is known as sacramental grace inasmuch as it carries with it a right to the supernatural helps necessary and useful for the accomplishment of each sacrament. (257)

Through the Sacraments, the divine meets the flesh and that union gives life a higher meaning and a supernatural force. The Sacraments unite the invisible with the visible, much as writers take the invisible elements of a theme and meaning and tie them to

¹ Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Indulgences, Extreme Unction, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. Protestants only retained Eucharist and Baptism after the Reformation.

visible words on a page. In writing, the higher theme meets with the written and accessible word and therefore the act of writing itself can be seen as a sacramental one. The Sacraments mark a Catholic's milestones in life with religious ceremony, imbuing the world with a sacramental order.

Jay Dolan asserts that this formality and order is appreciated by the devoted Catholic,

For Catholics the mass was immutable. As far as most people knew, the Mass had never changed and never would. They sat in church as quiet spectators and said their own private prayers. A holy ritual, and at times a spectacle, the Mass reinforced the trademarks of devotional Catholicism that had emerged in the nineteenth century.

(169)

American Catholics traditionally found great comfort in the omniscience of the Church, and part of this comfort stemmed from the ritual of the Sacraments and the consistency of their presence and presentation. This affected artists profoundly; for Catholic artists and their Sacramental view, the world was “a place charged with the creative and providential activity of God” (Labrie 2). As members of a religion that was confident in holding all the answers, such artists, including O'Connor, felt bound to communicate to others that in everything around them there was purpose, meaning, and vision. The Sacraments' power to tap into the elevated divine and bring it to the flesh below was an instrument in defining that purpose and vision.

Protestants do not deny such passion or vision. They simply did not invest those powers into only the Sacraments. Richard Tristano, in *What Southern Catholics Need to Know About Evangelical Religion*, explains that Protestants, specifically Baptists,

. . . . do not recognize the validity of confirmation, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony, which Catholics accept as Sacraments. They do observe both baptism and the Lord's Supper but do not acknowledge their sacramental power, denying that they convey grace. They refer to them rather as ordinances, rites ordained by Christ to be observed. Ordinances are symbolic in nature and constitute acts of obedience to the Lord. (17)

The symbolism of the ordinances was cardinal in Protestantism. While Catholics touted their Sacraments as the only path to God, Protestants favored a much more vertical accountability between God and man individually. Charles Reagan Wilson argues that, instead of Sacraments, they count the “finger sins”—a list of taboos within the religion. Instead of formal steps to salvation, Protestants are drilled in Sunday school that they “do not lie, do not cheat, do not covet your neighbor's possessions, do not lust even in your heart, do not drink alcoholic beverages.” When all these sins are checked off as being avoided, then “you have a claim on righteousness” (9). Rather than utilize the Sacraments to record one's progression in Salvation, a personal conversion and relationship to Christ is paramount. Donald Mathews explains that Protestants have a very different view of a converted Christian, outlining their key characteristics: “First

and most important . . . the convert must have had a personal religious experience of overpowering emotions rooted in a specific time and place. The second characteristic of the converted Christian . . . was the immersion in living water of adults who professed faith in Christ Jesus” (24). While most of the Sacraments were done away with for Protestants during the Reformation, they maintained the Eucharist or communion and the ordinance of Baptism. The latter is a key principle especially to the Southern Evangelicals. Wilson cites historian Samuel S. Hill, who notes that “the central theme of southern religious history is the search for conversion, for redemption from innate human depravity” (8). The outward symbol of this inner conversion is Baptism by immersion. Evangelicals sought to bring this to every soul, confident that every soul “through direct access to God, can be born again, touched by the Holy Spirit and cleansed—‘washed white as snow,’ as the old hymn says, by the ‘Precious Blood of the Lamb’” (8). Personal conversion and the Baptism that follows as a sign of that conversion are key tenets in the Protestant faith, especially in the South, where revivals and gatherings by the rivers to save souls were common.

In establishing O’Connor’s response to these two theological standpoints, the story “The River” is especially helpful, since its major event is one of the common Sacraments: Baptism. O’Connor herself recognized the challenge of writing about a sacrament, asking her friend “A” in a letter, the question: “How to document the sacrament of Baptism?????” (*Habit of Being* 171).

O’Connor documents Baptism powerfully, although her depiction may not be purely Catholic. When the young boy Harry changes his name to Bevel in the beginning of the story, there are echoes of a rebirth and a new beginning for the sad little boy. With

this move she establishes one of the main purposes of Baptism, that of renewal or rebirth. Young Harry's presence up to this point in the story is minimal, his physical appearance described as "mute and patient, like an old sheep waiting to be let out" (158). Although the imagery of a sheep awaiting the arrival of a shepherd and freedom invokes the idea of a disciple awaiting the Shepherd Christ, these are not words often ascribed to vibrant young boys. Instead, a gray picture is painted of a little boy accustomed to being ignored. "Good-by" is the only word we hear from the boy until Mrs. Connin asks him his name. He is a pathetic character painfully aware of his own insignificance in his home. When the one woman who takes the time to wipe his nose asks his name, he spontaneously changes it to one that he figures will "count" to her: Bevel, the name of the Baptist preacher she mentioned earlier. Here the baptismal process begins as Harry first senses a desire to matter to someone and takes on a "new name" to make that possible. Baptism is connected to Harry's longing for significance to someone just as Baptism implies a longing to be significant to God himself and to mark oneself as a true follower.

Both Catholics and Evangelicals would agree that baptism is a type of rebirth. The Protestants view Baptism as the symbol of being "washed clean in the blood of the Lamb" and in *The Church Teaches*, Baptism is called for Catholics "the door to the new supernatural life" (267). However, in the Catholic faith that door is often opened for the believer, as Catholics subscribe to infant baptism, making baptism more of a symbol of the grace that the child can accept later than a step of personal conversion or conviction on behalf of the individual himself. To Evangelicals however, "salvation must first be experienced before baptism has any meaning. Baptism, therefore, is an act of obedience and a symbol of faith" (Tristano 17). Conversion is an essential element to a true and

sincere baptism. For one religion, it appears that the conversion comes after the Sacrament is received, while to the other, the Sacrament is pointless if the conversion does not come first.

Critics of “The River” split over the significance of Harry Ashfield’s “Baptism.” Some argue that the drowning at the end symbolizes a true change. They deem the instruction that Harry receives at the hands of Mrs. Connin and the Preacher as sufficient. Stephen C. Behrendt, a member of that camp, believes the Baptism marks a moment of conversion, quoting O’Connor as saying that Harry “comes to a good end. He’s been saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death. He’s been baptized and so he goes to his Maker; this is a good end” (144). Behrendt himself claims that “Harry’s death is in fact the culmination of a series of linked experiences that turn upon knowledge and illusion . . . he is clearly capable of acts of free will, including the acceptance of grace” (145). Harry, or Bevel, is not a child who has been taught the doctrines of salvation from birth. He learned from Mrs. Connin who Jesus Christ was, thinking before that “Jesus Christ was a word like ‘oh’ or ‘damn’ or ‘God,’ or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime” (163). This quiet little boy was not an informed disciple and when he encounters the river and the actual preacher, Bevel, he is swept up into the rhetoric of the Evangelical wordsmith: “There ain’t but one river and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ Blood” (165). Mrs. Connin pushes Harry forward, taking most of the decision out of his control. The preacher prepares the boy by saying, “If I Baptize you . . . you’ll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You’ll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you’ll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?” (168). Harry responds in the affirmative, but it is clear that he does not understand the

location of the Kingdom of Christ when he thinks, “I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river” (168). After the preacher plunges “Bevel” under the water he informs the boy, “You count now . . . You didn’t even count before” (168). This is the pronouncement that changes the little boy’s world. Instead of being nameless and lurking in the corner, ignored by his socializing parents, he now “counts.” It is this idea that brings him back to the river later to meet his end. The boy wants to matter to Mrs. Connin, so he takes on a name that he thinks will matter to her. He wants to matter to the preacher, so he enters the water and the gate of baptism. His thirst for value leads him back to the river hoping to grasp the feeling of “mattering” forever. While Behrendt estimates that this education from Mrs. Connin and the preacher is ample preparation for the young boy’s acceptance of grace in the end, there are others who do not, and see Harry’s death at the end as anything but a conversion. A.R. Couthland, in “Flannery O’Connor’s Deadly Conversions,” calls “The River” “O’Connor’s most theologically puzzling story” (90). He argues: “the child’s immaturity and his lack of understanding of the reality of his final act render its spiritual significance meaningless” (90). I agree with Couthland’s assertion. Though O’Connor admits that Harry’s baptism will return him to his maker, she does not claim that the boy himself understood his own Baptism or was converted when he went to the river. He did not understand the ordinance of Baptism or even view it as such. He merely viewed it as an escape and a pathway to importance. When he returns to the river, O’Connor paints another image to point to the importance of agency in the ordinance of Baptism. She describes Harry’s attempt to baptize himself: “In a second he began to gasp and sputter and his head reappeared on the surface; he started under again and the same thing happened. The river wouldn’t have

him” (173). Now the river takes on an agency of its own in its attempt to reject the young boy who is unprepared for its cleansing power. Agency is the key in a true conversion and therefore in a true Baptism. Harry’s death was not a Baptism. His “Baptism” had taken place earlier with the preacher, making Harry’s attempt at self-baptism void of authority and order. This demonstrates that he did not understand the ordinance and was therefore ignorant of its requirements. Couthard’s accusation is sound; Harry’s “deadly conversion” is not a conversion at all, though this pseudo-conversion is only theologically confusing if you take O’Connor in a purely Catholic tone.

O’Connor clearly had a healthy respect for the Sacrament of Baptism, making it the focal point of the story. In her essay “Novelist and Believer” she wrote of baptism:

I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers,
baptism is a meaningless rite, and so . . . I have to see that
this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the
reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its
significance . . . I have to make the reader feel, in his bones
if nowhere else, that something is going on here that
counts. (162)

O’Connor did not make a writing error in omitting a believable personal conversion leading up to the death of the little boy. She believed that Baptism was essential and holy. As a Catholic looking at the world in a Sacramental manner, O’Connor sees Baptism as an essential step in returning to God. However, as a product of the Evangelical South, she also feels the import of personal conversion in Baptism—a conversion that she never gives Harry time to have. Therefore, we have in the end only a

young boy drowning himself. His violent end provokes no signs of a change in life or perspective that a true conversion would imply. Coulthard is right about the boy's Baptism being spiritually "meaningless," but O'Connor did this intentionally to show the impotence of a Sacrament, however necessary and holy, if the person receiving it has no true conversion of his or her own. The Evangelical idea that one must go through a process of conversion individually before Baptism can mean anything is prevalent in the tale. While the Sacrament is indeed Catholic, the sentiment of the significance of preparation for such a sacred step belongs more to the Southern Evangelicals.

Another story that reflects an Evangelical flavor in O'Connor's religious sentiments is "Greenleaf." Here Mrs. May can be interpreted as the Catholic, more concerned with order and propriety like those Catholics comforted by the repetition of Mass that Dolan mentioned. The wild Greenleaf family, however, with the mother and her thrashing "prayer healings," are Evangelicals through and through, ignoring decorum in faith and seizing a more violent and personal version.

Sacramental references, however parodic, by Mrs. May and her surly sons are central to the story. Wesley growls at his mother, "I wouldn't milk a cow to save your soul from hell," hinting of the idea of penance, while Mrs. May declares, "I'll die when I get good and ready" (321), which speaks to the Sacrament of Extreme Unction and her thought that she will die when she has taken the appropriate steps in preparing herself. The Mays are not overtly Catholic and symbolize more the order and formality that Catholicism as well as most organized religions represent. Mrs. May is not a woman of gritty faith but rather "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” (316). Again, the concept of the need for personal conviction and conversion surfaces as an imperative in salvation, one that the Mrs. May lacks. The sterile piety of Mrs. May reflects the quiet and dignified, but excessively formal and externalized, Sacramental steps in Catholicism, unlike the bizarre antics of Mrs. Greenleaf.

If Mrs. May is the embodiment of a more structured Catholic belief, Mrs. Greenleaf certainly captures the image of rollicking Southern Evangelicals. While Mrs. May thought the word “Jesus” had no place beyond the church pews, Mrs. Greenleaf both viewed and exercised her faith in a much more visceral way, applying her faith and passion to newspaper clippings about complete strangers caught in sin or afflicted in body and spirit. She “cut all the morbid stories out of the newspaper—the accounts of women who had been raped and criminals who had escaped and children who had been burned and of train wrecks and plane crashes and divorces of movie stars” (315-16). Even Flannery O’Connor admits a tenderness for the devout Mrs. Greenleaf, pointing out that “. . . . old lady Greenleaf was virtuous, you’ll have to admit. She prayed for the whole world” (*Habit* 150). Mrs. May describes Mrs. Greenleaf’s passionate “prayer healing” to the readers: “[Mrs. Greenleaf’s] face was a patchwork of dirt and tears and her small eyes, the color of two field peas, were red-rimmed and swollen, but her expression was as composed as a bulldog’s. She swayed back and forth on her hands and knees and groaned, “Jesus, Jesus” (316). This reflects her Evangelical vitality, focusing on reaching out to lost souls and applying her own faith to save them. While Mrs. May was focused on being industrious and respectable, Mrs. Greenleaf’s “yard around her house looked like a dump and her five girls were always filthy; even the youngest one

dipped snuff” (315). Mrs. May looked to order and labor to save her, while Mrs. Greenleaf rolled around on the ground and looked to passion and grace.

The Sacraments are specific steps that Catholics embrace as necessary actions in Salvation. They are not merely ordinances to demonstrate faith, but are the saving works themselves. Mrs. May trusts work as the Catholics cling to the labor of their Sacraments, although as Richard Giannone notes, Mrs. May “thinks she is increasing order when in actuality she divides and isolates herself from others, and separates others from their dignity” (427). Her central focus on order crowds out her ability to trust in Grace or the Holy Ghost. As A.R. Coulthard says, “The story doesn’t contain even a hint that Mrs. May is aware of a Holy Ghost to call upon” (92). Her trust is in the steps she can take herself with her own power and of her own volition, while Mrs. Greenleaf trusts passionately in the Holy Ghost alone. Through these two women O’Connor represents Protestant and Catholic tendencies and their perspectives on Salvation. The story is affected by the perspective of Mrs. May, tainting it with her opinions and viewpoints. If we believed her as an unbiased and trustworthy narrator, then it would be clear that she is the better person. She is respectable, industrious, and can peacefully say she has not “wallowed.” However, O’Connor makes clear that Mrs. May’s perspective is not completely reliable. While she depicts the Greenleaf boys as shameful, they are running a successful dairy and we often are reminded by their father of their respect for their mother and their work ethic. They are sons who served their country and live independently of their parents while Mrs. May’s own sons mock her and hold little value for the farm she has labored so diligently to pass on to them. The Greenleafs lack

decorum and dignity, but looking beyond Mrs. May's condescending narrative, we come to the truth that the Greenleaf family is respectable and industrious in its own right.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of O'Connor's respect for the rugged individual faith of the Evangelistic Greenleafs shines through her use of the bull as a violent means of revelation. The bull is introduced in the beginning as coming in from the east, just as the sun and the Son enter from the east. He is depicted as a "patient god" complete with a "wreath across his horns" (311). This Christ-figure that pierces Mrs. May so violently in the end belongs to the Greenleafs, reflecting O'Connor's possible belief that the Evangelicals are more in touch with Christ himself than the more formal Catholics. The Greenleafs own the bull that is utilized both to torture and to tutor the proud Mrs. May. Early in the story, Mrs. May proclaims that she will only die when she is good and ready. However, there are no rites given to her before her demise. Her death is violent and swift :

One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable. (333)

The Christ figure pierces Mrs. May's heart without ceremony or warning. This is a conversion by violent means, not Sacramental order. Mrs. May "sees the light," and it is the wild Greenleafs who, even if unintentionally, brought it to her. The "light" that

Mrs. May sees, however, does not necessarily constitute a true conversion. Just as Coulthard attacked the reality of Harry's conversion in "The River," he denounces Mrs. May's revelation, writing that "the absence of dramatic proof of Mrs. May's transformation is especially damaging to any spiritual point the story wishes to make because such a change in the protagonist constitutes a complete reversal of character" (93). Harry had no demonstration after his baptism of a change in behavior and O'Connor gives no time for Mrs. May to demonstrate a sincere redemption. In fact the light she does receive is described as "unbearable." Mrs. May's obsession with formality and proving a point in killing the bull destroy her in the end, yielding death but not necessarily enlightenment.

The bull administers her last rites in a loving manner, described by Giannone tenderly as a "way of showing that the bull knows the heroine as God knows her—as frail and needy and without the protective myths she spends her life cultivating" (429). These "protective myths" may be read as the Sacraments, the order in which Mrs. May invested so much trust and confidence. Again, Coulthard is right, there is no transformation, however there is certainly a revelation. In this reading O'Connor is remarking on the futility of the Sacraments unless they are fueled by a real and personal conversion, one which Mrs. May did not enjoy. Also, by demonstrating the failure of one violent goring to truly redeem Mrs. May, O'Connor asserts that one solitary Sacrament, be it Baptism, Eucharist, or Extreme Unction, does not hold the power to change the mind and save the soul. The action of a Sacrament cannot absolve and grant salvation in one blow. This message demonstrates that although O'Connor values the order and respect of Mrs. May and the Sacramental order the character represents, she also recognizes that the

Evangelical zeal reflected in the Greenleaf clan is indispensable in the process of salvation. Order is paralyzed without both faith and an individual relationship with God to rouse the soul to true conversion and salvation.

O'Connor's recognition of both the Sacraments and the necessity of an individual faith to drive them is reflected as well in "The Enduring Chill." Written in 1958, it echoes her own life, through the circumstances of the main character Asbury, an artist driven back home by illness to live with his Southern mother and sister. O'Connor herself was forced to return home to Georgia by her lupus affliction. Asbury is a writer like O'Connor, though not nearly as successful, a young man motivated by a rebellious intellect instead of by faith. Starving for intellectual interaction because he perceives it as necessary to a true artistic salvation, Asbury sends for a Catholic priest, much to the chagrin of his Protestant mother. His thirst for a wise Catholic Father to converse with about intellectual and spiritual matters fails to be quenched by Father Finn. "Blind in one eye and deaf in one ear," Father Finn disappoints Asbury right away when he fails to recognize the name of James Joyce and leaps into the discussion of spiritual matters, asking Asbury if he prays (375). The priest also soon launches into the basic Catholic catechism questions, despite the fact that Asbury has admitted his ignorance of them. What ensues is a humorous exchange parodying the Catholic catechism. The priest asks, "Who made you?," and ignoring Asbury's incorrect answer that different people believe differently, he moves on to ask, "Who is God?" Asbury replies, "God is an idea created by man" and begins to feel "that he was getting into stride, that two could play at this" (376).

The catechism becomes a game to Asbury, as he continues to taunt the priest with insincere answers. The danger here is one's viewing the Sacraments lightly. It also, however, reinforces O'Connor's belief in the requisite of a personal conversion in order for the Sacraments to have meaning or saving power. Asbury had no religious motivations in seeking the priest. Intellectuality was his God; therefore the catechism was a hollow and laughable exchange. The priest exhorts Asbury to pray, urging and reminding him that "God does not send the Holy Ghost to those who don't ask for Him. Ask Him to send the Holy Ghost." Asbury scoffs at the suggestion, declaring, "the Holy Ghost is the last thing I'm looking for!" (376). Asbury's idea of a Sacramental salvation is an intellectual philosophy, void of the Spirit. This intellectual arrogance is his downfall. He has deluded himself into the conviction that he is dying and that his salvation lies in his art and his intelligence. Asbury is not the only one that robs the Sacraments of their saving power. The Priest is also void of spirituality, as demonstrated by his manner of taking leave of Asbury, putting his hand on his head and mumbling "something in Latin" (377). Though he had the catechism dutifully memorized, he did not appear to have a sincere concern for Asbury's soul, skipping over Asbury's answers and ignoring his sarcasm. He barged through the questions, clicking through the motions of absolving Asbury. Robert Donahoo describes him as a "doctrinaire fanatic rather than [a] sensible man of faith" (110). This is an honest and upright Priest, refusing to banter with Asbury, and refusing to truly communicate with him about his concerns. Though his doctrine is perfectly orthodox and his Latin well-memorized, the priest's authority and the Sacraments he has the right to deliver are powerless to save Asbury as they are not presented with sincerity.

Asbury is disappointed in the dogmatic and unlearned Priest and still feels something is missing before he can die: “There was something he was searching for, something that he felt he must have, some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died—make for himself out of his own intelligence” (378). Asbury here is seeking for a final experience that will release him from life, he is symbolically seeking extreme unction, but has no recognition of the place for the spiritual in the rite or in death at all. This inability to recognize the spirit of the Sacraments is the crux of O’Connor’s stance on the Sacraments. Their existence and order are necessary in the journey to God, but even more necessary is the presence of a spiritual conviction. Spiritual conviction is essential in both Catholicism and Protestantism. However, in Catholicism, the conviction and the grace that follow come through the Sacraments, while to the Protestants, conviction must be felt first for the Sacraments to serve any purpose of their own.

The end of “The Enduring Chill” aptly demonstrates this tenet. Earlier in the story, Asbury describes a water stain on the ceiling above him in bed as a bird, poised to descend upon him. Asbury realizes in the end that he is not dying but is instead condemned to a life of infirmity and dependence on the mother whom he disdains so much. With this revelation, the bird that he had feared since childhood begins its descent: “The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once to be in motion.” As the bird descends, Asbury has a violent interaction with truth similar to Mrs. May’s:

Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last possible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. (382)

While the bull as a Christ figure pierced Mrs. May, Asbury is punctured by the Holy Ghost in the form of a water stain. The images of his revelation at the end are powerful ones. His eyes are opened and the view is terrifying. He realizes that he is bound to be ill, with his intellectual superiority stripped away; instead he is left powerless to confront the raw spiritual power of the Holy Ghost. Again, there are no orderly last rites given, no recitations, or figures of authority. Only the Holy Ghost remains, showing Asbury the reality of the power of the Spirit in a “purifying terror.”

This ending demonstrates O’Connor’s conviction of the paramount importance of the Holy Ghost in conversion and in the Sacraments. Describing how she came to the ending of the story in a letter to Maryat Lee, O’Connor explains her elemental choice of ice for the fiery Holy Ghost she reveres so deeply: “I see no reason to limit the Holy Ghost to fire. He’s full of surprises” (293). While no Priest gave the last rites to Asbury in the end, the Holy Ghost was there in all His glory, and that was a much more effective exchange than the meeting with the Priest, with his proper authority and memorized Latin. The Spirit proved weightier than the Sacraments.

Flannery O’Connor conceded that any Catholic writer must use their “sacramental view of life” to sustain and support the vision “that the storyteller must have” (*Manners*

152) O'Connor treasured the Sacraments and deemed them as necessary steps in salvation and in the supernatural connection to the divine. The Sacraments are the orderly manner through which man communes with God. This is the crux of O'Connor's Catholic faith. The Southern Evangelical in her, however, asserts the importance of the presence of the Spirit before the Sacrament can bestow Salvation. Without a personal and individual communion with God, the Sacraments are reduced to memorized Latin and futile catechisms. Her stories demonstrate this recognition. Young Harry hoped to matter and therefore took the step of baptism, but without an understanding of the spiritual reality behind the ordinance, returned to the river and ended in a tragic early death. The formal Mrs. May was deluded by her own empty piety, while the Greenleaf family and their raucous faith raised respectable sons and owned the bull that pierced Mrs. May with her revelation in the end. And the arrogant Asbury, who looked to his art to save him, discovered an ignorant but forthright authority in the Catholic priest and a formidable tutor in the descending Holy Ghost. Together these stories demonstrate O'Connor's Catholic recognition of the Sacraments and her Evangelical recognition of the Spirit that must drive them individual by individual. In each of these stories, characters come to receive violent death or violent revelation. Asbury is the only character who can be read as truly being enlightened. He did not just see a light and die, he saw the future, "the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring" (382). His was a conversion with an implied possibility of change. He saw his future and was humbled by it. While Harry received the Sacrament of Baptism and a Christ-figure physically pierced Mrs. May, it was the Holy Ghost descending that brought true conversion. Asbury's life was changed, not by action, but by the Spirit. That Spirit must be present in the

Sacraments, or they are impotent and worthless. The priest's visit did not bring the Holy Ghost, but He descended gradually into Asbury's life, degree by degree until Asbury recognized his future and the truth.

In O'Connor, Protestants and Catholics find a mediator in their struggle over the Sacraments. She recognizes in them the potential for both futility *and* utility. She concedes that they are essential to salvation as the Catholics assert, but she fiercely agrees with the Protestant idea of conversion preceding the ordinance. Grace is bestowed by the fire of personal conversion that drives one's soul to partake of the Sacraments. The Sacraments cannot do it themselves. With Evangelical flair, O'Connor takes the order of the Sacraments and reminds her audience of the necessity of the Spirit for the Sacraments to bring a soul to God.

CHAPTER TWO

The Combination of Grace and Works in Personal Conversion

The Sacraments evince the Catholic creed that one is responsible for one's own salvation and earns God's sanctifying Grace by well-defined steps. Though Grace is manifested in the taking of each Sacrament, the Catholic action of taking the Sacraments themselves saves one and paves the way to salvation. When the Protestant denominations discarded the majority of the Sacraments, they also spurned the idea that it is by works that one is saved. In *What Southern Catholics Need to Know about Evangelical Religion*, Robert Tristano points this Protestant idea out to his fellow Southern Catholics that "the Reformation ideal of justification by faith alone is very much operational here. People are not justified through good works" (15). He quotes the *Baptist Ideals*: "Salvation is not the result of human merit or achievement but of divine purpose and initiative. It is not by means of sacramental mediation or moral training but by divine mercy and power" (15). Catholics cling to their works to prove their worthiness of salvation while Southern Protestants rely exclusively on God's saving grace and His merciful election. In the battle for supremacy between works and faith, pride becomes a central danger to both. Protestants could point to Catholics and call it prideful to consider their actions weighty enough to propel them to salvation. On the other side, Catholics could offer the rebuttal that Protestants entertain a pride of their own in laying claim to some kind of panacea of grace that ignores their works and simply places them in God's grace with His guarantee that "a member of the elect, a true believer, can never fall away from the state of grace" (Tristano 15). Protestants do not disregard good works as an

element in returning to God, but see them only as mere signs of election, not as steps that one must take to be saved.

O'Connor takes the middle ground between these two doctrines. Her writings demonstrate both sympathy and disdain for the doctrines of both faith and works. Above all, she appears to be raising a warning cry to that both positions are prone to the worse sin: pride. Her down home style sympathizes with the Evangelicals, as we saw in "Greenleaf." Chapter One argues that O'Connor has a respect for the gritty faith among the Southern Evangelicals, undermining the more formal works of the organized faithful. Mrs. May is a hard working, intelligent lady who pins her faith to her own efforts and scoffs at the blind trust of the faithful Mrs. Greenleaf. O'Connor violently sounds a warning cry at the end of "Greenleaf" to those who invest confidence in their own works to save their souls. That warning to Mrs. May will resurface in this chapter in a different story when a similar warning is issued to Joy (Hulga) Hopewell in "Good Country People," another character who confides solely in her own intelligence to glorify herself, scoffing at the silly naïveté of her mother and the Bible salesman. Not only does O'Connor use the surly Hulga to assert a point about the egotistical danger of relying on one's own merits, but also through Joy's mother and their neighbor, Mrs. Freeman, O'Connor creates a conflict that is a microcosmic example of the doctrinal battle between works and grace.

While O'Connor approves of some Protestant tendencies, she senses danger in them as well, and her Catholic faith forces her to consider the merits and necessities of good works. She rejects the Calvinistic idea of election, and in her writing makes it clear that relying on works is not necessarily prideful; that in fact each person has his or her

own autonomy in the process of salvation. One cannot rely simply on grace, election, or social standing. This opinion is evident in another of her final stories, "Revelation," in which Mrs. Turpin is enlightened by the ugly Mary Grace. While Mrs. Turpin's social standing in her own mind assures her of her own election, her works are not necessarily Christian, and her rude awakening warns that she cannot rely on God's grace to mercifully pluck her from ignorance and bigotry and place her among His chosen few.

O'Connor is not choosing one side of the theological argument, nor is she using her fiction to expound on doctrinal differences. She is using her fiction to dramatize the danger of pride in clinging too much to one side or the other. In her essay, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," for instance, O'Connor writes that a writer, specifically a Catholic one, cannot see man as depraved, but must see him as "incomplete in himself, as prone to evil, but as redeemable when his own efforts are assisted by grace. And [he or she] will see this grace as working through nature, but as entirely transcending it, so that a door is always open to possibility and the unexpected in the human soul" (197). Grace is of paramount importance, but so is agency, and we must harness them both in order to merit justification.

Agency and faith are introduced early in "Good Country People" through the names of the two matriarchal figures in the story, Mrs. Hopewell, Joy's mother, and Mrs. Freeman, the wife of the Hopewell's farm hand. Mrs. "Free-man" personifies the primacy of works. She is described as having only two expressions, "forward and reverse" (271), and from the beginning, is associated with action. She represents man's free will, the will that Catholics exercise in taking it upon themselves to earn sanctification by working their way through the Sacraments to commune with God. She

also is a busybody, described by her former employer as “the nosiest woman ever to walk the earth” (272). She is presumptuous as well: “Nothing had been arrived at by anyone that had not first been arrived at by her.” As she says of herself, “I’ve always been quick. It’s some that are quicker than others” (273). This egotism ascribed to a character representing “free man” hints at O’Connor’s disposition to disapprove of those who pin their salvation only on their own works. In Mrs. Freeman’s case she applauds her own “quickness” which is not necessarily a moral virtue, but in fact an attitude which incurs O’Connor’s disapproval. While action is admirable, boasting of it is laughable.

In contrast, Mrs. Hopewell is full of trite aphorisms of submission, trusting to some higher power, “hoping” that all will go “well.” She is introduced with this sentence: “Mrs. Hopewell had given it up” (271). As a foil to Mrs. Freeman’s assertive nature, Mrs. Hopewell epitomizes the faith side of the argument. It is notable that her first mentioning is one of submission and acceptance. She, like the Protestants, is limited to reliance on salvation coming by “giving up” to God and accepting His mercy if He was willing to offer it, rather than working and climbing there with one’s own merits. In “giving up,” Mrs. Hopewell accepts a fate with a happy hope that all *will* be “well.” The list of Mrs. Hopewell’s favorite sayings includes “nothing is perfect,” “that is life,” and “other people have their opinions too” (272-3). Each of these carries a tone of ambivalent resignation to what the forces above deem fit for her. While O’Connor disapproves of the conceit of Mrs. Freeman and, by extension, thereby those who invest their faith in works, she is not wholeheartedly jumping on the Grace bandwagon. She does not appear to be applauding such resignation, as it carries with it a type of blindness and frustrating apathy. Although Mrs. Hopewell does show initiative in inviting Mrs.

Freeman into their world before she can nose her way in, she ignores Joy's outbursts and is unwilling or unable to resist Manly Pointer, the slippery Bible salesman. While scorning the pride of those dependent on works, O'Connor also chastises the possibility of the lazy acquiescence of those who rely solely on Grace.

One important intersection where these two women demonstrate the attitudes of their different theological representations involves their acceptance of and interaction with Joy Hopewell, the disgruntled Ph.D. living on the farm with her mother. Joy has had her name legally changed to "Hulga," which repulses her mother. Seen in a Sacramental manner, Joy's name change should be a rebirth or Baptism of sorts. Joy's new name does not stem from a conversion or spiritual experience, but instead hinges on her own rebellious pride to take her Christening upon herself. Mrs. Hopewell, though disapproving, disregards Joy's "rebirth," refusing to use the new name and in her resigned manner going on as if nothing has occurred. Mrs. Freeman, however, "without warning one day . . . began calling her Hulga" (274). Mrs. Freeman, a devotee to works, recognizes the "ordinance" and acts accordingly, while Mrs. Hopewell, the solafideist, ignores the Sacramental renaming and maintains her blissful state of denial. Again, O'Connor does not appear to be taking sides in using Joy's name-change as a vehicle to draw out ways in which Mrs. Freeman's and Mrs. Hopewell's names pinpoint their beliefs. Mrs. Hopewell's blatant disregard for Joy's choices intimates an egotism all its own in its rejection of personal agency and change in one's pilgrimage. Joy takes great pleasure in using her name change as a victory over her mother: "One of her major triumphs was that her mother has not been able to turn her dust into Joy but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga" (275). Her mother's naïve

optimism is unable to redeem Joy's disposition. However, the smug Joy exercises her own volition in denying the joy in her life or her mother's, donning the hideous new title, "Hulga." As such, Joy, or Hulga, Hopewell is the strongest evidence of O'Connor's Protestant tendencies, pointing to her distaste for the proud intellectuals who rely on their own merits and boast in their ability to save themselves by their works.

Hulga is a haughty and acidic Ph.D., full of her own supposed wisdom and anxious to dismiss the "good country people" her mother treasures as derelict white trash. Because her leg and her heart condition bind her to her home and she cannot rebel by fleeing, she resorts to other forms of rebellion. Martha Chew notes that Hulga rebels instead by "forbidding her mother to keep a Bible in the living room" (21). She protests not only against faith, but also against all her mother's happy hopes, stumping around on her wooden leg "with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it" (273). Hulga is not simply blind to her mother's optimism, but *willfully* turns a scornful ear to spiritual faith or anything else that would mean attributing her joy, pain, or success to anyone but herself. She chooses to be blind, proclaiming herself an atheist, and removing God from her life. As a participant in her own renaming, she commandeered the authority to name herself, stealing that Sacramental right from the proper authorities. In her rebirth, she not only neglected authority, but also purposefully used the step to scar herself rather than heal herself. As her mother opined, "she had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. . . . Her legal name was Hulga. . . . she was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense" (276). Hulga's Ph.D. rendered her educated, but void of practical skills with which to improve the world. Mrs. Hopewell was at a loss as to what to tell others about Hulga, unable to

understand how to tell others that she was a “philosopher.” Hulga herself was only sure of one thing in her own identity: that she was better than anyone around her. Her name change displayed her disregard for her mother, while “she looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity” (276).

To demonstrate the perils of Hulga’s pompous smugness in her Ph.D., O’Connor brings her to a humiliating end when Pointer escapes with both her leg and dignity in tow. Although she deemed her intellect superior to faith, arguing that she did not “have illusions” but was “one of those people who see *through* to nothing,” (287) her own confidence blinded her to the reality of the Bible salesman’s character. Thus at the end she is fooled by him just as her mother was, whom she scorned so cruelly. Chew observes that through Hulga, O’Connor “is, of course, mocking rebellion against religious belief, or rather trying to discredit it, to the extent that her portrayal of Hulga is shaped by her polemical purpose in the story.” However, Chew goes on to note that “O’Connor satirizes not so much rebellion as ineffective rebellion” (22). Hulga is so confident in her intelligence and relishes her “rebellion” so proudly that she is blind to the truth that she is merely damning herself and is no closer to the truth than the mother she disparages. In being taken in by the Bible salesman as well, Hulga “remains her mother’s daughter” (Chew 23) and comes to a humbling end herself. Though she is not spiritually converted, she is certainly taught a lesson.

O’Connor is not making the clear argument that Hulga has had a spiritual revelation or rebirth in the process of her humiliation. As she says in her letters, “Nothing ‘comes to flower’ here except [Hulga’s] realization in the end that she ain’t so smart. It’s not said that she has never had any faith but it is implied that her fine

education has got rid of it for her, that purity has been overridden by pride of intellect through her fine education” (*Habit* 170). The Evangelical in O’Connor scorns the presumption that a person can save herself by her own efforts and warns against the hypocrisy that an outward appearance of good works can create. Someone can receive every sacrament and remain unconverted, and a man can sell the word of God and not believe a bit of it. Manley Pointer, for instance, is no messenger of salvation, declaring to Hulga, “I hope you don’t think that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going!” (290). His works are as empty as Hulga’s. Though he was spreading the word of God, he himself is a moral reprobate, stealing virtue from those who trusted in his pretended goodness. O’Connor is pointing to the danger of taking pride in performing the appointed works or knowing the designated catechisms. This lesson resonates with her rural southern roots and the Protestant idea of humility and reliance on the saving grace of God rather than on one’s own works or merits for salvation. Evangelicals reject the steps of the Sacraments as having the power to save in and of themselves. The Grace of God and an abiding faith in Him are the only pathway to salvation. Though Hulga is not redeemed in “Good Country People,” her illusions are ripped from her and she is forced to see the emptiness in her educated arrogance. O’Connor dramatizes an Evangelical point that works alone cannot save the soul

However, O’Connor’s Catholic training regarding works cannot be discounted in interpreting her stories. Ralph C. Wood observes, “her devotion to the Church of Rome made her deeply critical of the same Southern Protestants whose fierceness of faith she admired. She is especially troubled by the anti-sacramental character of their

Christianity. It leaves them, she laments, with nothing to guide their faith nor to curb their heresies” (16). O’Connor, while recognizing the possibility of a dangerous egotism in a purely Sacramental outlook, also warns against the prideful perspective in the Protestant’s implicit trust in Grace alone. Grace, to Protestants, is not something chosen or earned, but is bestowed mercifully by God and they accepted as a gift. O’Connor however, “contends, on the contrary, that Catholics regard their eternal security as a thing either won or lost only in a freely willed response to the offer of grace” (Wood 17). “Our salvation,” she asserts, “is worked out on earth according as we love one another, see Christ in one another, etc., *by works*” (*Habit* 102, italics added). Therefore, although O’Connor admires the simple faith of the Evangelicals, her writing disputes that one can climb the path without exerting any intentional effort. This Catholic thinking manifests itself most clearly and fully in one of her final stories, “Revelation,” in its portrayal of the humbling of Ruby Turpin.

Mrs. Turpin is the quintessential Southern Protestant lady. She is assertive and boasts a large presence, made clear by the opening line of the story: “The doctor’s waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence” (488). She is confident in her social status and shortly after sitting down commences to rate her fellow waiters in the doctor’s office, scanning them and categorizing them in her mind. Mrs. Turpin represents a Calvinistic idea of Grace. She believes that her admirable and superlative characteristics were bestowed upon her without any effort of her own. Upon meeting Mary Grace, she notes the young woman’s terrible skin, “blue with acne,” while thinking that she herself “was fat but she always had good skin” (490). Mrs. Turpin is

secure in her elect status, sure that she was chosen by Jesus to be placed in the sweet and chosen spot in which she rests: white, female, Christian, and classy. After a cursory glance and quick grading of the other waiting patients, Mrs. Turpin, in a common activity, reflects on the question of whom she would have “chosen to be if she couldn’t have been herself.” If Jesus had given her the option of being a “nigger or white trash” she “would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use,” and she would have finally opted to be “a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one” (491). Mrs. Turpin is certain that she was destined to be a classy white woman and thereby feels assured not only of her social status but also of her salvation and election. Jesus had the option of making her a classy black woman, but *He* chose to make her a classy white one. *He* chose her fate and made her what she was by *His* agency and grace. The caste system that Mrs. Turpin creates also reflects the Southern Protestant ideology that class is a sign of salvation. Mrs. Turpin created her own taxonomy of social classes and their merits:

On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not above, just away from—were the white-trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land-owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of

money were common and ought to be below she and Claud
and some of the people who had good blood had lost their
money and had to rent and then there were colored people
who owned their homes and land as well. (491)

The class system that Mrs. Turpin created parodies a Calvinistic doctrine equating social standing with one's election. However, the muddle caused by "new money" and blacks rising on the social scene reflects the confusing inconsistencies in this idea. Somehow, however, Mrs. Turpin is resigned to the fact that it still all boils down to "good blood." Money or not, the idea of class and grace still comes down to family and blood and birth, things over which people have no control. Mrs. Turpin has no respect for the soul who overcomes bad blood to make good. To her, such people are forever bound by the situation that God saw fit to place them in, elect or not. After all, according to her, "you had to *have* certain things before you *know* certain things" (494).

Another moment where O'Connor reveals the danger of trusting in grace alone for salvation comes directly before Mrs. Turpin's violent revelation at the hands of Mary Grace. After hearing an upbeat song, Mrs. Turpin begins to revel in satisfaction at her station in life. She is thankful to Jesus for placing her where she is and making her a generous person. Again, she returns to the imagined scenario of Jesus giving her options for her life path. In her reverie this time, he offers her to "be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it" (497). She apparently assumes that Jesus determined long ago if she was to be a good woman or not and that she should be grateful that he let her be born good. Not recognizing her agency in the process, she is certainly grateful for his bestowal of

goodness and grace, announcing to her waiting room audience, “If it’s one thing I am it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’ It could have been different. . . . Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” (499). This boastful gratitude has echoes of the New Testament parable in Luke when Jesus condemns a Pharisee who offers a similar prayer: “God I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all I possess” (Luke 18: 11-12). Mrs. Turpin’s pharisaical prayer of self-satisfaction meets with a humbling condemnation just as the Pharisee’s did in the New Testament. While Jesus hurls spiritual condemnation, Mary Grace hurls a book and sinks her fingers “like clamps into the soft flesh of [Mrs. Turpin’s] neck” (499).

Here Mrs. Turpin’s painful “revelation” begins. Mary Grace, the blue-faced scowling intellectual who was stewing and boiling throughout Mrs. Turpin’s pronouncements in the waiting room, finally releases her anger and commands Mrs. Turpin to “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog” (500). Mary Grace relegates Mrs. Turpin to the very place that she was sure her elect status had prevented her from ever going. Mary Grace’s character is a reversal from O’Connor’s stance on intellectualism in “Good Country People.” While Hulga, the ugly and proud intellectual in that story, is on the receiving end of the revelation, in this story, Mary Grace is the intellectual who doles out the lesson and sparks the revelation. Here intellectualism is not the downfall, but instead the impetus for a sinner’s salvation. This agency shows the multiple layers in O’Connor’s belief system. She does not scorn intelligence, only the

prideful misuse of it. Her nomenclature reveals her respect for the formidable power of Grace in the process of salvation, as *Mary Grace* is the vehicle for the eye-opening experience of Mrs. Turpin. However, the “Grace” that Mrs. Turpin receives is not the grace that bestows good skin or predestines one to be born above Blacks or white trash. It is a grace that awakens the soul and rewards good works.

The manner in which Mrs. Turpin’s revelation begins is poignant. It is not by voice or vision, but by a violent reception of the written word in the form of the book *Mary Grace* hurls. This is a Protestant method of conversion, one that depends on Biblical teaching and interpretation. Catholics are much more visual turning to supernatural visions and iconography. As Charles Reagan Wilson points out in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*, Protestants are oriented towards the written word, clinging doggedly to the Bible and interpreting it literally (76). One religion clings to the word, while the other clings to the images and visions the word inspires. Again, however, O’Connor combines the two theologies when the final recognition comes visually, with a supernatural visual revelation, opening the skies: “There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk . . . a visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire.” It was not words or reading that stirred her soul, but she looked to the heavens and a supernatural force took what she saw, repainted it in a mystical fashion and erased her ideas of class and entitlement. In the light of the sky she observes herself and others she deemed her equals, walking behind the “companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white

robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics and clapping and leaping like frogs” (508).

Although, in her vision, her group was calmer and keeping pace and “alone on key,” they were still behind all the others in their march to heaven, dissolving the order she hinged so much upon.

The order to which Ruby Turpin originally subscribed was based on a false sense of deserved grace, not one earned by humble and diligent effort to know God and serve Him. O'Connor respects the Grace of God and recognizes the requirement of mercy for salvation. Still, her Protestant tendencies fill her with an appreciation that “personal loyalty to the person of Christ is imperative” (*Habit* 290). Christ is the central figure in her quest for salvation, causing her to spurn intellectuals, such as Hulga Hopewell, who would boast of their own merits (like those Catholics who would lean on their own works to announce themselves worthy for salvation). Works on their own will not save a wayward soul, but O'Connor cannot relinquish works completely to the power of Grace. She rejects the Evangelical perspective of those like Ruby Turpin who may think that the grace of her class and family has reserved her place in heaven and secured her status as a good person, regardless of her prejudices or behavior. O'Connor respects both sides of the coin, confident in the necessity of both works *and* grace to procure salvation. There is an inherent danger of false pride in both sides if one subscribes to them wholly, without exception. Therefore, the only way to humbly receive exaltation is to find a happy compromise. She rejects the idea of predestination or wealth and class as a sign designating the elect. Works have their place in the process of exaltation, but she does not discount that the grace of a merciful God, in the end makes salvation possible. O'Connor asserts that only after people prove their merit by Christian work (or Catholic

order) are they prepared to call upon the necessary grace and mercy that the Protestants eagerly claim. Once again, we find Flannery O'Connor combining the two theologies to meet on common ground, relishing a hope that the hard working Catholics and their Grace-loving rugged Southern Evangelical neighbors can recognize the legitimacy of both theologies and their necessity in the journey to God and salvation.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MARRIAGE OF THE CATHOLIC BODY TO THE PROTESTANT SPIRIT IN “PARKER’S BACK”

As a Southern Catholic O’Connor naturally has moments in which her Catholicism meets a Southern Evangelical influence, and a greater understanding of faith and God emerges. This intersection is evident in many of her stories, but nowhere is the meeting fleshed out as literally as in the marriage of O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker in O’Connor’s final story, “Parker’s Back.” In this story, she marries two unlikely characters, and in doing so “marries” Protestants and Catholics and their respective pilgrimages to salvation. She is specifically dealing with how the two creeds differ in their views of the body and the spirit and the different manner in which their followers expect to receive divine revelation.

To Catholics, the body and the spirit are inseparable, the body in fact playing a key role in the process of enlightenment and communion with God. *The Church Teaches*, in outlining the purposes of the Sacraments, highlights the connection between spirit and flesh as a symbol of communion with the divine:

When the Word was made flesh and dwelt in our midst, the mysterious, invisible life of God took visible form in this material world of human life. The paradoxical union of the divine with the human, the invisible with the visible, that characterized the Incarnation of the Word, continues in the

Church in which the divine person of Christ lives on in
mysterious union with the visible, external society, the
mystical body, of which he, as man, is the head. (257)

Christ was the word *and* flesh and he dwelt in our midst. He lovingly condescended to join the ranks of man, uniting the divine with the human. The union of body and spirit can thus be seen as a union between God and man, and to disdain the body as inherently evil is to reject the “Incarnation of the Word.” The body is the visible element of the soul and cannot be ignored in the process of salvation, as verified in the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation. The host becoming literally the body of Christ reflects a role of the body in worship. Christ is not an intangible spirit, but He is flesh and bone and his body is as important in their worship as His spirit. Ross Labrie points to the veneration Catholics hold for the physical element in spirituality, in which they recognize the world and the physical body as “flawed because of the effects of original sin,” but also “as retaining some of the inherent goodness that originated in its creation by God” (2). In the words of William Everson, Catholics have a “sense of immediate physical contact with God through the sacraments,” the body is not something to be disdained or removed from a conversion, but to be recognized as a gift from God and a vehicle for communion with Him.

Some Protestant sects, however, view the body as something to conquer and escape if a person is to achieve spiritual communion with God. Thomas Merton, for example, who warns against the “old Protestant groove” to make “material creation evil of itself” (Labrie 2-3). Although Episcopalians and Lutherans are much closer to Catholics, other Protestants, especially Calvinistic ones, see flesh as evil and spirit as

good—an approximation of that dualism which Catholics refer to as the Manichean Heresy which proclaims that all flesh and material is evil and must be surmounted in order to connect with God's spirit. Although beliefs about God taking on flesh vary from denomination to denomination within the Protestant faith, the overall consensus of the flesh and spirit being separated in the conversion process is consistently affirmed. The “finger sins” that Charles Reagan Wilson mentions in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* reflect the Evangelical fervor to tame systematically the flesh by shunning lying, cheating, lust, alcohol, etc. (9). When one has successfully rejected the traps of the corporeal realm, then one has achieved spirituality and can be counted as a disciple. This purifying process causes one to strip the body away and cling to the basic spiritual necessities.

One of the primary Protestant spiritual necessities is the Bible. To Protestants, the Bible is the key player in revelation, while Catholics, by faith, are much more confident of visual and supernatural inspiration. With the body playing such a crucial part of worship, images of the body, and typically images of a suffering body, become powerful tools in a Catholic conversion. A pervasive iconography of saints, statues, figurines, and glorious cathedrals attest to the Catholic tendency to rely on the visual. Catholic worship services demonstrate this attraction, as the congregation is treated as an audience, listening as the priest reads and sitting “in church as quiet spectators and [saying] their own private prayers” (Dolan 169). Mass is a comforting performance for them, as Dolan calls it, “a holy ritual, and at times a spectacle” (169). Catholics do not sit in the pews studying the word for themselves, but prefer to be moved by the visual spectacle of it all and to allow the Priest to interpret the Gospel on their behalf. This type of “secondhand”

revelation was one of the catalysts for the Protestant Reformation. The reformers disliked the priests serving as their interpreters and wanted individual and personal experience with the word of God.

Many centuries later the same desire still resonates with Protestants. Charles Reagan Wilson observes the Southern Protestant's obsession with the Bible and with basing one's life on its teachings. He cites a Georgian legislator, Hal Kimberly, who outlined a reading list for every card-carrying Protestant in the South: "Read the Bible. It teaches you how to act. Read the hymn book. It contains the finest poetry ever written. Read the almanac. It shows you how to figure out what the weather will be. There isn't another book that is necessary for anyone to read" (114). Protestants cling to their Scripture as Catholics cling to their patron saint medals. As Wilson observes, "roadside signs of 'Jesus Saves,' 'Get Right with God,' or 'Prepare to Meet Thy God' are the southern Protestant equivalents of Roman Catholic saints on the dashboards of cars" (76). While images stir the soul of the devout Catholic, it is the reading of the Word that drives the Protestant to prayer and repentance.

O'Connor recognized this difference, and though Catholic, applauded the biblical tenacity of her southern neighbors. Like Wilson, she recognized that "the Bible was *the book* in the South" (Wilson 115) and warned her fellow Catholics that they could learn from Protestants' devotion to the Word. In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" she warns that "Nothing will insure the future of Catholic fiction so much as the biblical revival" (203), for "the Bible is held sacred in the Church, we hear it read at Mass, bits and pieces of it are exposed to us in the liturgy, but because we are not totally dependent on it, it has not penetrated very far into our consciousness nor conditioned our

reactions to experience.” O’Connor saw a difference in her Protestant Southern neighbors. *Everyone* clung to the Bible, memorizing verses and guiding their lives by it daily. O’Connor observed the universality of the Bible when she acknowledged that in “the South the Bible is known by the ignorant as well” (203). In Protestantism, O’Connor recognized elements necessary to true conversion and adopted them into her own Catholic devotion. Her recognition of the inherent differences between the two religions as well as the benefits that they might receive from each other is prominent in her characterization of the marriage of the two main characters in “Parker’s Back.” With Obadiah Elihue (O.E.) representing the visceral and visual Catholic and Sarah Ruth the plain and literal Protestant, she creates a marriage that potentially fosters true conversion and redemption. Paul Elie argues that O’Connor makes it “clear that this ‘plain’ and ‘sour’ Christian woman and the tattooed Parker don’t belong together” (360). But the fact that they *are* together, married in fact, is a powerful statement about the possibility of “wedding” the two theologies.

The first words ascribed to Sarah Ruth are “plain, plain” (510). Her father was a “Straight Gospel preacher” (517), which accounts for her fundamentalist tendencies. She is “forever sniffing up sin” (510), resonating with Wilson’s description of the Protestant’s fascination with the “finger sins.” (9) Even her rawboned physique seems to radiate a fanatical faith that she clings to with an iron grip. She and O.E. were married in the Country Ordinary’s office because she “thought churches were idolatrous” (518). This dry and strict description of Sarah Ruth personifies strict Southern Fundamentalist Evangelicals and their purist rejection of ornament and ceremony.

As a representative Protestant, Sarah Ruth also rejects and scorns the body. She calls Parker's beloved tattoos the "vanity of vanities" (515) and "when he attempted to point out especial details of them, she would shut her eyes tight and turn her back as well. Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down" (518-19). This Calvinistic suspicion of the body as anything to be admired or revered serves as a foil to Parker's obsession with his body. Sarah condemns his artistic hobby, proclaiming that "At the judgment seat of God, Jesus is going to say to you, 'What you been doing all your life besides have pictures drawn all over you?'" (519). For her it is only the spirit that Jesus will concern himself with at the final judgment. Sarah Ruth's appearance demonstrates how little her body matters to her in her quest for salvation and rectitude. Her passionate slap when O.E. uses the Lord's name in vain betrays where her zeal lies. Although O.E. attempts to seduce her by combining the physical and spiritual, arguing that he'd "be saved enough if [she] was to kiss [him]," she soundly rejects the heresy, declaring that "That ain't being saved" (518). The body has nothing to do with salvation, and in Sarah Ruth's mind, can only get in the way.

Sarah Ruth's most significant quintessentially Protestant statement occurs when O.E. returns with his Christ tattoo. Sarah Ruth responds to O.E.'s challenge about not knowing what God looks like with the assertion that God "don't *look* . . . He's a spirit. No man shall see his face" (529). This pronouncement is the strongest evidence of Sarah Ruth's Fundamentalist Protestantism. She spurns the flesh and clings to the Bible, trusting only what she reads there.

Sarah Ruth's reliance on the written word is the second element in her representation of the Protestant faith. As mentioned above, words—the name of God,

incite her to violence against O.E. When Parker considered getting a tattoo on his back of “an open book with HOLY BIBLE tattooed under it and an actual verse printed on the page” he then imagined Sarah Ruth’s response: “Ain’t I already got a real Bible? What you think I want to read the same verse over and over for when I can read it all?” (519). The Protestants’ vigorous grip on their “real bible” finds a home in Sarah Ruth Parker. The written word, not fancy pictures of it, is the key in true worship. The only revelatory moment Sarah Ruth has in the story, in fact, comes through words, specifically in learning O.E.’s full name. It is her curiosity about his name that drives her to condescend to a mild flirtation with O.E., and the thirst to hear the name drives her even to swear on “God’s holy word” that she will never share it with anyone. When the name is finally “revealed,” “her face slowly brightened as if the name can as a sign to her.” She was filled with awe, speaking his full name “with reverence” (519). O.E. gained respect in her eyes through his biblical name, and a light entered her soul through the power of the word.

This revelation by word sharply contrasts with the visual revelations O.E. experiences throughout the story. An “enlightening” experience similar to Sarah Ruth’s learning his name came when he was only fourteen years old “when he saw a man in a fair, tattooed from head to foot”(512). Upon seeing the “vision,” Parker “was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes” (513). It was not words that stirred O.E.’s soul, but images and visions. This pattern established early in his life continues throughout the story. O.E. and his emotions are often described in terms of his eyes. His eyes “were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him” (514). His eyes took on a “hollow preoccupied expression” after

being married to Sarah Ruth, and following his accident on the tractor his eyes were “cavernous” (520). When he appeared before the artist to request his monumental tattoo, the artist could not recognize “Parker in the hollow-eyed creature before him” (521). O’Connor’s choice to associate Parker with his eyes serves as evidence of his visual, and by symbolic association, Catholic connection. His affinity for the visual creates different revelatory experiences from those of Sarah Ruth. The tattooed man began O.E’s initial journey through body art, while a later and more fantastic “vision” of a burning “bush” drove him to his most significant tattoo of all. Although Parker had been warned of the tree in the middle of the field, “as if he didn’t have eyes” his mind was caught up in the question of what to engrave on his back. Suddenly, the tree was “reaching out to grasp him” and “he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, ‘GOD ABOVE!’” The tractor crashed into the tree and burst into flame. Just as Moses was commanded to remove his shoes because he was in a holy place, O’Connor removes O.E’s shoes for him, flinging one under the tractor and one further away. In any case, “He was not in them” (520). The bush burned and Obadiah Elihue was stirred. He ran “in a kind of forward-bent run,” fleeing directly to the artist without thinking; “He only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents accomplished” (520). The pivotal change came in a fiery vision to his eyes, not a spoken or written message. Just as the Catholics turn to the visual spectacle of Mass or Passion plays, O.E is moved by the spectacle of tattoos and burning bushes. The grotesque and supernatural have the power to move both Catholics and O.E. Parker.

What follows both of these revelatory moments in “Parker’s Back” reveals O.E.’s Catholic tendencies as well. O.E. Parker was consumed by his body. After being “lifted up” by the tattooed man at the fair, O.E. began his odyssey of tattoos. Then, after witnessing the burning bush, he journeyed to the artist and commissioned him to imprint Christ on his back. O.E. internalized Revelation by literally carving it into his body. Internal change was not sufficient, for everything returned to the body. Each enlightenment or adventure was followed by a tattoo, his body becoming a chronicle of his life, fears, and experiences. The tattoos pierced more than O.E.’s skin. The confusion of the mismatched tattoos (that could never look as smooth or connected as the original tattooed man) seemed to infect his soul with a similar confusion: “It was as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare” (514). O’Connor uses the tattoos as a vehicle to assert the Catholic idea that in conversion the body and the spirit are inseparable. Each experience was carved into O.E.’s body and pierced his spirit with turmoil and confusion and even joy. Everything in Parker was manifested physically, his dissatisfaction growing so great “that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo” (519). The dissatisfaction drove him to distraction over the tattoo. The distraction drove him to the burning bush. The burning bush drove him to the tattoo of Christ, which led him to conversion. His body and the images therein were fundamental in his pilgrimage to faith.

However, Parker’s true conversion is not purely visual and physical. Nor is it purely Catholic. The experience that led him to the particular Christ image that he chose for his tattoo was a powerful one. He flipped through the different images of Christ. The experience seared him:

Parker's heart began to beat faster and faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a great generator.

He flipped the pages quickly, feeling that when he reached the one ordained, a sign would come. He continued to flip through until he had almost reached the front of the book.

On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly.

Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK. (522)

The powerful experience that moved Parker so tremendously involved travelling through numerous images of Christ, but these images were contained in a book. The eyes that glanced at him from the ordained page stopped his pounding heart and spoke to him in the silence. Parker found God in silence on the pages of a book. This has echoes of Elijah's communion with God in the book of Kings: "after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 18:11-12). Just as Elijah finds God in the stillness, Parker hears the silence as if it "were a language itself" and he knew that he had found God. O'Connor's biblical allusion and the fact that Parker found God on the pages of a book departs from his purely visual spirituality. He sought an image of Christ, but that he found it by searching the pages of a book is paramount. The imagery of the book leads him to engraving Christ upon his back, just as Christ proclaimed that he has "graven" us on the palms of his hands. (Isaiah 49:16). As we became a part of Christ, Christ became a part of Parker, and the journey commenced with the opening of a book.

The manner in which O.E. opened and read the book is significant. He read it *backwards*, rejecting the kind images of the New Testament Christ. He goes back to the fundamental, harsh and edgy figures of Christ; specifically an angular Byzantine mosaic. Obadiah's name comes from the Old Testament and his reading backwards serves as a call from O'Connor for us all to read backwards and return to the fundamental truths. To her fellow Catholics, it is a summons to return to the text of the Bible as an essential tool in a personal pilgrimage. To the Protestants, it is a reminder of the God of the Old Testament and His justice that cannot be ignored in favor of his mercy.

O.E.'s recognition that "the eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed" (527) illustrates the beginning of his conversion and redemption. However, it is in the moment when true light reaches his soul that O'Connor asserts her belief that visual manifestations are not sufficient for true conversion. When O.E. returns home, he is not met with open arms, but with a closed door. Sarah Ruth had barred his entrance and refuses to acknowledge him as "O.E." Continuing to ask him, "Who's there?", Parker concedes and leaning down to the keyhole whispered his full name: Obadiah. Immediately "he felt the light pouring through him turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts." He declares, "Obadiah Elihue!" and the door opens (528). When the door to forgiveness is closed in O.E.'s face it is not a vision or an image that brings his soul light and opens the door, it is his name, it is a *word*. Visions have their place, but O'Connor clearly reveres words as powerful elements in the process of redemption. Her respect for the Protestant affinity for the written word of God shines through in the course of O.E.'s transformation.

O'Connor recognized that the theologies of Catholics and Protestants both contain truths that overlap in one's communion with and reconciliation to God. Just as words and images work together, so do the body and the spirit. The body is essential in spirituality for O'Connor. When at a dinner party a former Catholic deemed the doctrine of transubstantiation as nothing more than a symbol albeit a "pretty good one," O'Connor rejoined, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it" (*Habit* 125). The uniting of the disciple's body with that of Christ was a real and vibrant doctrine to O'Connor. The flesh and the spirit work together to create a palpable redemption. When "the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality," she asserted, "the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable" (*Manners* 162). The Catholic in O'Connor saw God in everything, even in a body covered in tattoos or wracked with lupus. She wrote "Parker's Back" while in the throes of lupus, finishing it shortly before she died. She was experiencing the limits of a mortal body but as Paul Elie explained, "In bed, betrayed by her body, O'Connor made the human body the image of God, to be raised up and glorified . . . in 'Parker's Back' she made the image literal. Each of us, she insisted, is an image of God" (364). The imperfections of the fallen human body were not to be spurned, but accepted as a part of the process. In a letter to "A," O'Connor explained her understanding of the Resurrection: "the Church teaches that our resurrected bodies will be intact as to personality, that is, intact with all the contradictions beautiful to you" (*Habit* 124). To O'Connor, the foibles and weaknesses of the flesh are an inherent part of the journey to God. Even with "contradictions" the body and the spirit therein reflect the majesty of God. In O'Connor's writing, they cannot be deemed mutually exclusive, for elements of both are necessary to truly understand oneself. In O.E's case he came to accept his true

and entire Christian name which he formerly spurned, and through his own identity, came to understand God.

Just as elements of the body and the spirit are necessary in conversion, O'Connor deems elements of both Evangelicalism and Catholicism necessary as well. Paul Elie asserts that in creating the theologically mismatched pair, O'Connor makes it clear that Sarah Ruth and O.E. don't belong together. (360) However, even though their marriage is not by any means a picture of bliss, they *are* married, and they do need each other, just as Evangelicalism and Catholicism are connected and need to borrow from each other to reach their full potential in the saving of souls. Although Sarah is not a loving wife, her Evangelical fervor is the impetus for Parker's conversion, driving him to engrave Christ on his back and eventually his heart. Parker's body needed Sarah's spirituality to set him on the painful path to redemption. His Catholic body was a vehicle for his conversion and inseparable from the process, but a book brought him to the image and the spoken word filled his spider web soul with light. Protestants may be heretical to deny that the flesh is connected with the spirit, but O'Connor clearly admires their faith in the Word. She makes it clear that she believes Catholics have something to learn from her Southern Evangelical neighbors, and vice versa. Protestants need to learn to accept and appreciate the physical as a part of spiritual redemption and Catholics must learn how to turn to the Bible and individually absorb it in the way of their Protestant counterparts. "Parker's Back" is more than a marriage of an unlikely duo. It is O'Connor's allegory of her concept of the process of true conversion. In the bickering couple, she illustrates both the Catholic and Protestant pilgrimage to Revelation and declares that both paths hold necessary doctrines. Though they may disagree with each other at times, both

denominations, like Sarah Ruth and Obadiah Elihue Parker, need each other to arrive at truth and see the face of God.

CONCLUSION

Since the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics have often been at odds, sparring over doctrine, cultures, and authority. Followers of both religions have suffered at the hands of the other and reconciliation seems impossible. Robert McAfee Brown, in “The Issues Which Divide Us,” summarizes the dilemma of the Protestant-Catholic disagreement: “To the Protestant, the Catholic is the stubborn fellow who claims that his Church alone is the channel of salvation; to the Catholic, the Protestant is the heedless fellow who refuses to accept the salvation God has offered” (59). He goes on to quote Friar Gustav Weigel, who declares the religions as mutually exclusive:

As long as the Catholic is Catholic and the Protestant is Protestant, there is only one way to union—the conversion of one to the views of the other. If that should happen, either Catholicism or Protestantism would disappear. There can never be a Catholic-Protestant Church, or even a Catholic-Protestant fellowship of churches. This is the basic fact. It does no good to anyone to hope that this fact will somehow sublimate into something thinner. (61)

The two religions have been at odds for centuries, and most assume that the rift is irreconcilable. However, in Flannery O’Connor, both religions find a home and a common bond. She unites elements of their doctrines and recognizes essential elements in both beliefs in a sincere pilgrimage to conversion and to God. There must not be a

conversion to one or the other but a mutual recognition of each other's merits. The Southern roots of O'Connor inspire this merging. In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" she proclaims that the South is the perfect garden in which to develop both Catholic faith and literature. She observes that "there are certain conditions necessary for the emergence of Catholic literature which are found nowhere else in this country in such abundance as in the Protestant South; and I look forward with considerable relish to the day when we are going to have to enlarge our notions about the Catholic novel to include some pretty odd Southern specimens" (206). Protestantism is an intrinsic part of Southern culture and therefore one cannot unite Catholicism with the images of the South without blending it with Protestantism as well. In that same essay, she expounds on the common bonds between Catholic novelists and the South, explaining that the Catholics can reinforce Southern literature because "they will know that what has given the South her identity are those beliefs and qualities which she has absorbed from the Scriptures and from her own history of defeat and violation: a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured" (209).

O'Connor was a devout Catholic, but she recognized that a healthy "distrust of the abstract" was admirable in her Protestant neighbors. Though she respected the Sacraments, she admired the Greenleafs' rudimentary and boisterous faith. She invested faith in works and individual behavior, but also recognized the essential need for the grace of God, something she could have easily gleaned from Protestant society. In writing stories that chronicle conversions, the characters that enjoyed true and sincere conversion were those that united elements of Catholicism and Protestantism.

Harry Ashfield received the Sacrament of Baptism, but without understanding it was void and hollow. Mrs. May was dutiful and appropriate in her formal faith, but she lacked a true witness and so her death was merely violent, not revelatory. Asbury rattled through a catechism with a near-sighted priest, but the words of the ordinances were merely mumbled Latin. It was the Holy Spirit that pierced his soul and brought him revelation that would carry him into the future. He was destined to live and “endure” and so his revelation would truly affect his life. His pilgrimage combined the Sacraments with the Spirit, a necessary combination for true conversion.

Hulga Hopewell was robbed of her egotistical assertion of independence and superiority, but hers was not a spiritual conversion for she did not recognize the grace of God, merely her own fallibility. Ruby Turpin, however, is an example of a true conversion. Proudly grateful for God’s good grace assuring her of salvation, Mary “Grace” destroys her illusion and Mrs. Turpin recognizes the importance of your work and your efforts in earning one’s place in heaven. She screams across the hog pen and God shout back at her, opening the heavens and teaching her that her place was not guaranteed by her birth, but that she must follow the works of Christ in order to merit His Grace. It is the combination of Catholic works and Protestant Grace that truly brings the soul to God.

O.E. and Sarah Ruth Parker demonstrate the combination as well. O.E’s visceral pilgrimage to God needs Sarah Ruth’s plain grip on the Word. Her fundamental religiosity sparks his journey to Jesus Christ. Sarah Ruth’s heretical interpretation of God and the flesh are balanced by O.E’s obsession with engraving the body with his revelations and experiences. Through Obadiah Elihue’s conversion, O’Connor

imaginatively creates the Catholic-Protestant relationship that Friar Weigel deemed impossible. Both religions have something to offer the pilgrimage, and without each other conversion cannot be complete.

O'Connor is not out to convert the world to a specific religion or creed. As her admirer Thomas Merton observed, O'Connor "respected all her people by searching for some sense in them, searching for truth, searching to the end and then suspending judgment. She never said: 'Here is a terrible thing!' She just looked and said what they said and how they said it" (366). In drawing her characters and their journeys towards truth, she never expressly named their religions or specific denominations. Her vision was not focused on the formality of denomination, but the fire of individual faith. She sculpted characters that needed Sacraments but more importantly the Spirit that animated them. Her characters failed in receiving redemption if they were invested solely in their own works or trusted blindly in God's good Grace; and only when they trusted visions and words to affect their body *and* spirit could they be brought to the true destination, which, as Paul Elie points out, "is Jesus Christ himself" (363). He is the destination in O'Connor's fiction. She was not on a crusade to unite Protestantism and Catholicism into one universal denomination. Her crusade was to unite the truth of both into one pilgrimage that would edify and instruct her readers and bring them closer to truth and their own sincere pilgrimage to God.

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