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CATHOLIC IN THE SOUTH: CONFESSIONS OF A CONVERT'S SON

BY FENTON JOHNSON

"Catholics and muskrats," my father once said, "are never found far from water." Throughout Catholic grade school, my classmates and I received maps, distributed by the Louisville archdiocese, illustrating my father's premise. Entitled "No-Priest Land USA," the maps colored in black those American counties lacking a single Catholic priest. The South was, of course, a sea of black, penetrated by peninsular strips of white, where—true to my father's observation—Catholics had settled along the rivers.

The maps of No-Priest Land didn't identify specific towns or parishes, but it was easy to find my hometown: New Haven, Kentucky, one thousand solidly Catholic souls. We were a headland in white, surrounded on three sides by dark Protestant hordes. Right on the county line, we were separated from No-Priest Land by the Rolling Fork River—the width, in summer, of a football field.

Thirty years later the New South has made inroads into this particular frontier of No-Priest Land, but the contrast can still catch the eye of the observant traveler along the old Jackson Highway, US 31E. North of the Rolling Fork, the countryside is sprinkled with convents and monasteries, among them the Trappist monastery at Gethsemane, where Thomas Merton lived and wrote. Catholic homes in New Haven display the range of papist paraphernalia, inside and out: crucifixes, holy water crucibles, blessed palm hung to protect the house from fire, earthquake, tornadoes, disease; statues of the Virgin protected from the elements by upright bathtubs, half-buried

in the earth and painted blue. I think of two 19th-century wood mosaics of the Sacred Hearts of Mary and Jesus, hanging in my family's home—dark walnut hearts pierced with seven swords of blond maple (Mary) or crowned with golden chestnut thorns (Jesus), both dripping rich cherry blood.

This is civilized voodoo, with no analogue in the spare Protestant homes a few miles to the south. Decorated with Norman Rockwell reproductions and sometimes a plain wooden cross, these living rooms belie little of the darker side of faith, or life.

The question that puzzled me as a child, that puzzles me now when I go back, is what these symbols signify; the differences in states of mind, heart, and soul they imply, between the Catholics of the South and our Protestant neighbors. What follows is a mixture of anecdote and outright conjecture, born of a contrast that years later sticks in my mind, demanding explanation where perhaps none is to be had: the people I knew as a child kneel to chant Latin with a golden-robed priest, as clouds of incense rise to the God of the Old World, enshrined in a gleaming brass monstrance on a marble altar; while across the Rolling Fork, a mile, maybe, to the south, the people I came to know as a teen-ager gather under tents before a black-suited preacher, to thump and shout and clap their hands for a distinctly New World Jesus.

Located at a religious crossroads, the Middle East of the upper South, St. Catherine's Parish took its role seriously. Where children in urban parishes collected pennies to ransom the pagan babies of Korea, we at St. Catherine's collected scraps of aluminum foil to redeem the pagan babies of the cartographically dark counties of Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Kentucky itself. Girls favored collecting chewing gum wrappers; not only were they free, they provided a theologically correct excuse for what was otherwise plainly a vice. Cleverly folded one into another, these bits of foil created a kind of origami testimonial to Catholic

evangelism—a chain that lengthened through the year. Sometime in May, the Virgin's month, the chain was weighed in and sent off to a destination that took such things in exchange, we assumed, for cash, though we never saw the check. For all we knew, the foil was bartered in some dark Atlanta alley for the heathen children themselves.

We did see Protestants, mostly Baptists, in New Haven. Their own counties were dry—they had outlawed the sale of alcohol—and they kept us Catholics in the business of quenching their thirsts. Otherwise, the two religions barely acknowledged each other. Our Nelson County oriented itself to the north, to Louisville and the Catholic counties strung (with the muskrats) along the Ohio River. Across the Rolling Fork, LaRue County looked towards its theological kin further to the south in Kentucky and Tennessee. No physical barrier existed, of course; there was only the force of social custom. We knew our place, the Protestants knew theirs. "The red fox has his territory, the gray fox has his territory, and they don't mix," my father said. We were the reds, they were the grays. Nobody crossed the line.

Nobody, that is, except my mother. Seventh of eleven children, born on the Protestant side of the Rolling Fork, she grew up wild, partly because her own mother died early. She rode motorcycles, smoked cigarettes, flirted (dangerously, as it turned out) with the Catholics across the river, among whom the more daring Protestants ventured in search of vice. She met my father in a dance hall, where he was recovering (so he said) from a tragic affair with a woman whose glass eye he could not abide. Seven months later, my mother was baptized, said her first confession, received her first Communion, and spoke her marriage vows, in a six a.m. ceremony attended by no one from either family.

From the perspective of the secularized 1990s it's hard to appreciate the magnitude of my mother's leap from Bible Belt Protestantism into the ritualized pomp of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church. To help draw the picture, an older sister, an avid collector of Catholic paraphernalia, supplies a copy of

My Catholic Faith, our eighth-grade catechism, underscoring passages the nuns read aloud, with pointed glances at myself and my brothers and sisters:

> The Church strongly disapproves of *mixed* marriages. From its long experience, the Church knows that mixed marriages are rarely happy . . . the non-Catholic partner is liable to divorce and contract another marriage, whereas the Catholic is bound not to take a second partner. The proper training of the children becomes difficult . . . it is likely that [they will] lose the Faith.

Well, on this last score they were right: of the eight children in my family, six of us have more or less left the Church, though not for lack of effort on the part of my devout mother. Incidentally, *My Catholic Faith* also sheds light on the scheduling of the six A.M. wedding:

> The Church shows its *disapproval* of mixed marriages even after dispensation has been granted. Sacred functions, such as the Nuptial Mass and Blessing, are forbidden; the banns are not published. . . . The ceremony is not to take place in the church, but in the rectory or some other convenient place.

Such as, perhaps, the woodshed; or so our nuns implied.*

Like all the Catholics among whom I lived, I grew up knowing both that I lived on the edge of a sea of Protestants and knowing almost nothing about them. Thirty years after my mother's conversion, relations between her and her family were strained. We visited our non-Catholic relatives rarely, never entering their churches. When my Protestant grandfather died, we had to obtain special permission from the parish priest to set foot in the church where his funeral was held.

*Not that the Catholics had a monopoly on propaganda. In later years, Protestant friends told me of films they saw in summer Bible camp, that portrayed the same mixed marriage from the other side: the wife sprawled in bed, still in her nightclothes, while the husband says carelessly, "We'll have room for that one, but I don't know what we'll do with the next."

In 1968 all this changed, and suddenly: partly because of rising Catholic tuition, partly because my family's 30 years' war with the St. Catherine's clergy reached its Waterloo, my parents removed their last three children from Catholic schools, to send us instead to the public high school in my mother's native Protestant county. Each morning we walked the half-mile through town, past the curious eyes of our grade school friends (now bound for the parish high school), down to the Boatyard Bridge, where we crossed the Rolling Fork to board the school bus for a circuitous ride to Protestant Hodgenville.

I was 14. Incredibly enough, until shortly before, I had believed most of what the nuns taught: Virgin births, indulgences, communion hosts that fell from the tongues of careless schoolchildren to burn holes in the church floor. Rock 'n roll, Vietnam, race riots in nearby Louisville—repercussions from these were reaching my home town as I entered my teens. Inheritor of my mother's rebellious blood, possessed by the inflexible logic of adolescence, I rejected the Church with the fervor I'd once reserved for my faith.

I considered atheism, but this was too far beyond the pale even for my passionate sensibilities; besides, the Church had done its work well—I was, and am, a believer, if not in the Church, at least in something. I resolved instead to shop the religion market, in all its Christian diversity. Shortly after crossing the river, I designed for myself an ecclesiastical survey course, consisting of Sunday visits to the Protestant churches of each of my high school classmates.

I remember vividly the plainness of those religions, contrasted with St. Catherine's gaudy mysticism. Statues, monstrances, marble inlaid with gold leaf, stained glass—St. Catherine's had all these, to excess. The interior walls were covered with frescoes painted by Italians imported for the job: angels trailing banners (*Gloria in Excelsis Deo*), whole walls covered with patterns of interlocking acronyms (BVM/IHS), crucifixes festooned with lilies, pelicans tearing open their breasts to feed their blood to their starving young.

Entering the stark wood-and-plaster whiteness of the Hodgenville Baptist Church, I grasped in a dim way how different the act of seeing itself must be for those who came to their faith in a church so completely empty of things to look at.

At those Sunday services across the river, I contrasted for the first time these two ways of looking at the world. As Catholics we were reared with the notion of man as both inherently fallen and inherently capable of salvation. With the help of God's grace, everyone was a potential candidate for the pearly gates. The Protestant concept of an "elect"—persons designated as saved in advance of the fact of life—was foreign, as was the concept that once "born-again" in Christ, salvation was assured, however you might backslide. At St. Catherine's, I had been taught that salvation was an elusive prize. You might be a paragon of virtue, yet in your dying breath curse the hit-and-run driver who laid you low, and so plunge straight to hell, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Alternatively, you might live a lifetime of depravation, yet manage that single act of perfect contrition as the car sped away, and so rise to join the angels.

De facto, this understanding made for an appreciation of the precarious nature of life. To my mind, it accounts for the Catholic traditions both of piety and hedonism, since both reflect an intense involvement with the moment at hand. Together with the notorious assertion that we were "the one, true Church," it accounts as well for our feeling of moral superiority over our Protestant neighbors. *We* had to work for salvation daily, negotiating moment by moment the dark recesses of the soul. Theirs was the easy route, accomplished in broad daylight in front of an emotional crowd and a faith-charged preacher.

For their part, the Protestants sat comfortable in the knowledge of their majority and in the sense that the land belonged to them and they to it. I recall the patriotism that permeated the Protestant services I attended. The ascendancy of the Kennedys notwithstanding, as Catholics we maintained an uneasy relationship with government, which we understood

as tolerating our presence while not exactly welcoming it. As my Protestant friends were quick to point out, our loyalties were divided between Washington and Rome, that quintessence of all that was Old World, decadent, foreign. To enter the Southern Baptist church and find an American flag as the pulpit's most prominent and colorful adornment was to understand that here was an amiable ally of "the God of our forefathers," however those forefathers might bear no relation to *me*.

As an American, schooled in political principles rooted in Protestantism, I was attracted by this easy alliance between democracy and theology. Protestant congregations elected and rejected their preachers. Services were sometimes led by deacons—mere mortals, my classmates' fathers, who had been sanctified by no order other than the respect and votes of their fellow worshipers. The preacher characterized man's relationship with God as downright personal, incorporating a respect for the process of questioning that had no equivalent among Catholics, to whom the inquiring mind was evidence of the devil's presence. I was pleased by the Protestant notion that the route to God was a path open to individual reflection and modification, rather than a collective turnpike whose curves and milestones were dictated from Rome.

All this seemed so rational, so sensible, so *American*, demanding nothing like Catholicism's rigid adherence to blind faith. How impressively different from the Byzantine theology and rigid orthodoxy of my own church—*the* Church, as it styled itself, with an upper-case 'C'. I was sure, for a while, that I'd found that for which I searched: religion based on logic and intellectual consistency.

And yet I left these Protestant services dissatisfied. I had been raised to believe that religion served as humanity's institutional acknowledgment of mystery; in these Protestant churches I found little that was mysterious. These religions bore the imprint of the hands of remembered generations, whereas the Church of my childhood had been shaped by hands outside of memory. It was the shaping of those hands—

the Catholic Church would call them, collectively, the hand of God—that my Catholic mind found to be the *sine qua non*, that characteristic lacking which the Protestantism of the South seemed uncomfortably like social exercise.

To attend Easter midnight mass as a child was to experience mystery rendered palpable, the Theater of Faith. We approached the church guided by the light of a few votive candles, illuminating the stained glass windows from within. Inside, in near-pitch darkness, we groped our way up the aisle, to sit beneath statues shrouded in mourning robes of purple satin. The service began on the church steps, with the blessing of oil and fire; that same fire spread through the congregation via hundreds of beeswax tapers passed from priest to communicant, accompanied by Latin at once foreign and as familiar as our native tongue: "*Lumen Christo*," "*flectamus genua*," "*laetare*," these phrases speak to me across time, arousing now as then a keen sense of the infinite mystery of the word and the world.

Then the litanies, whose interminable, repetitious chantings I now understand as a kind of meditation: First the Litany of the Saints, the unabridged version, honoring hundreds of saints ("Santa Lucia," "*Ora pro nobis*"; "All you holy virgins and widows," "*Misere re nobis*"). Then the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary ("House of gold," "*Ora pro nobis*"; "Mystical rose," "*Ora pro nobis*"), that recalled the Virgin cults of the Middle Ages and beyond, to the goddess worship of ancient cultures.

And then the dramatic climax: long after midnight, the pipe organ, silent since Holy Thursday, pulls all stops for the Gloria. The church lights come up, the priest sheds his white alb and black stole for shimmering gold, incense rises in clouds, with the tug of a thread mourning cloths drop from statues, banks of flowers and lit candelabras appear on the altars, and over all the tower bells recklessly peal, unceasing, their deep-throated voices palely echoed in the high-pitched clamor of the altar chimes.

For a small child, at once half-asleep and charged with the thrill of staying up far later than any other night, this was powerful stuff. I think of the Easter sunrise services I attended with my Protestant friends. Touching in their simplicity and with an invariably better-trained choir, they lacked something all the same—not God, certainly; maybe Glory.

A letter from my mother, the original convert, arrives here. She has neither heard nor read the above, but she's received word through the family grapevine that I'm considering the subject, and she writes to express her views.

I'm happy to think my non-Catholic background was groundwork for becoming a good Catholic. I wanted to question every aspect and choose the best and eliminate the worst . . . I like to think people like me are what has brought about changes in the Church. I don't think that [my children] have left the Church—I believe that all are still a part of the Church and maybe they're not practicing but still are members of the Church and treat all people with respect and consideration in their beliefs.

This is the Protestant in my mother speaking—believing that the individual, not the institution, arbitrates what is and is not Catholic; that simple respect and charity are sufficient unto the cause. This, of course, is not the message of the Church, of John Paul II, who understands that the Church has endured and prospered exactly because it insists on being taken on its own terms.

The church *has* changed, of course, as has the South. Hodgenville, the Protestant town across the river, now has its own Catholic church; while in the fervor for the plain and simple that followed Vatican II, the frescoes of St. Catherine's were painted over, in an aqua intended to match the Virgin's blue but closer in color to the paint used for swimming pools. Midnight mass is now at eight p.m., the purple shrouds have gone the way of the Latin mass itself.

But in the New Church, in the New South, ways of seeing the world persist long after surfaces have changed. As for

myself, I seldom go to mass, and my forays into No-Priest Land led me to subscribe long ago to the essential fact of the Protestant world view: that when push comes to shove, men and women confront their gods and demons alone, without benefit or need of an intermediary. For better or worse, however, I find that I am still affected—or afflicted, depending on one's point of veiw—with the Catholic way of seeing things, that I have chosen not to reject: an insistence on the primacy of mystery, on the fundamental irrationality of being, on the significance of grace as a force in determining the course of human actions.

For a while, across the river among my Protestant friends, I was afraid that I had been alone in receiving an addictive dose of the opiate of the masses, Catholic-style. Then I left Kentucky and went to other towns on the water, on Midwestern rivers or on the Pacific. There I discovered other Catholics who shared my dilemma, in kind if not in degree. American Catholics, they'd come to their faith in a Protestant land, and had absorbed its influences even as they retained Catholicism's basic view of the universe and humankind's place in it (no doubt this is what makes us so troublesome to Rome).

In my experience—that is to say, an American experience—a parallel leaps here to mind: that of Southern liberals, confronting the land of their birth: a place that shapes, irrevocably, its native sons and daughters' ways of seeing the world, and yet about which those same persons have such mixed emotions.

I have not lived in the South in years, and I participate in Catholic services only under duress. But I've chosen to keep my accent, as I've chosen to keep the Catholic way of seeing the world. Partly this is in response to others' outspoken perceptions of myself, delivered so often that they've acquired the ring of uncomfortable truth: anyone with *that* accent must be a Southerner, anyone *that* guilt-ridden must be a Catholic. More to the point, I think, my choice represents a peculiar, self-conscious decision shared by liberal Southerners and backsliding Catholics everywhere, to affirm and preserve their troublesome inheritance.

The Church does not encourage the bending and cutting of its precepts to individual consciences, any more than that collective understanding we call the South encourages one to claim it as one's own while believing deeply in liberal, humanist ideals. This is how the Church and the South are alike: the proposition they deliver to their own is all or nothing. I think of the Sistine Chapel's flayed self-portrait of Michelangelo, ridden with guilt and hanging from the fingers of St. Bartholomew, and the fierce, self-incriminating denials of Quentin Compson that end Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* The great art of the Church, the great literature of the South are often as not born from the dramatic tension inherent in confronting, as art must, this institution, this place that one can neither abandon nor abide.

In thinking of the Church, in thinking of the South, I have come to understand that this is what they share: an uncompromising demand that they be accepted on their own terms. It is exactly because they demand our love so wholly and unconditionally that we find them so hard to leave behind, that they draw us back in spite of ourselves. In this age of relativism, few places can, few people do.