

1

Kidnapped

From Baptist Playwright to “Catlick”

I grew up a fundamentalist Baptist in 1950s Freeport, Illinois. Although I was allowed to play basketball with Mikey Pohill, I couldn't go inside his house. The Pohills were Roman Catholic. If I saw a priest or nun walking toward me downtown, I crossed to the other side of the street. Priests and nuns were known to kidnap Baptists and force them to become papists.

Every August, Guy Libby came through our town and gave a tent revival. The final Saturday night, hosted at the First Baptist Church, was called “Pack-the-Pew Night.” Each family was assigned a pew to pack with sinners. I was seven years old when my family won “Pack-the-Pew Night,” overflowing into the Vosses' pew behind us, all on account of my inviting Miss Damier, my principal, and Miss Elgin, my sister's fourth-grade teacher, and almost all of our neighbors in a zealous door-to-door campaign. I did not invite the Pohills.

Guy Libby played two trumpets at the same time. A clear part of my calling to become a tent evangelist would be to play two trombones at the same time. Competitiveness is one of the gifts of the Spirit apparently edited out of St. Paul's list, but I possessed it in abundance notwithstanding.

The prize for winning "Pack-the-Pew Night" was that Guy Libby and Strat Shoefelt, his song leader, would come to your family's home for Sunday dinner the next day. You can't imagine my thrill at meeting these sacred celebrities in person. In truth, I can't imagine the thrill my mother felt when hearing the prize announced in front of a packed sanctuary. Could any cook have been more pleased, except, perhaps, Martha of Bethany?

I'm afraid the dream of becoming a tent evangelist rivaling Guy Libby proved short-lived. By fourth grade, I'd heard the call to play second base for the Chicago Cubs. (I would skip all Sunday games, of course, as a testimony.) This ambition took deep root until I came face to face with the sobering statistic of going 0 for 4 (years) in Little League. Even for an aspiring Cub, this probably placed the bar too low.

From Christian baseball player, I advanced to Christian trombonist (only one trombone by then, with loads of vibrato, along the lines of Mr. Bill Pearce, whose sacred trombone renditions could be heard over

the airwaves of WMBI from Moody Bible Institute), Christian composer, Christian attorney, Christian missionary (preferably someplace with plumbing), and, finally, Christian playwright. This last was a turning point. Notice in each instance how the statement of my ambition asserted a parallel reality. In the lexicon of my Baptist boyhood, “Christian” was a magical adjective capable of converting a professional noun into a vocational calling.

I was a theater major in college, unlikely as that might sound on a fundamentalist campus. I got a good education, performing in eighteen plays over three and a half years, including works by Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, and O’Neill. I planned on going to the University of Minnesota for graduate school on a McKnight Fellowship in conjunction with the Guthrie Theater.

That’s when it hit me. I was rehearsing Creon in Anouilh’s *Antigone*. Walking back to my dorm room around midnight after a grueling practice, I suddenly realized, “I’m not becoming an actor after all. What I’m actually becoming is a writer.” Much as I enjoyed performing, I loved rehearsal even more. The best part of acting for me were those six weeks of ingesting another’s words, letting the speech, thought, and behavior of a character shape my own language, thinking, and attitudes. (Later, I would come to think

of St. Paul's admonition to discipleship — "Put on the mind of Christ" — as, essentially, a performance metaphor requiring an actor's rigor and discipline.)

One of the great things about growing up Baptist is the reverence one develops for individual words. From earliest childhood, I can recall forty-five-minute sermons, twice each Sunday, on the eternal consequences of understanding a single noun, verb, or preposition. Preachers held forth on the authoritative interpretation of a biblical phrase, and I believed that salvation depended on the orthodoxy of one's grammatical parsing. I've been reading as if my life depended on it ever since.

For a fundamentalist, the act of writing, if engaged in at all, was thought to be more of a righteous crusade than an artful expression. The "word" served as an instrument of evangelism, as in preaching the word or teaching the word, and not as material for poetic, dramatic, or narrative discourse. And even if one wrote for the purpose of evangelism — witness today's bestsellers by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins — the idea was to do it quickly. Fundamentalists had little motivation to perfect their prose or to revise a phrase; utterance was propelled by apocalyptic urgency, eschatological giddyup.

Pursuing the writer's vocation put me into a theological quandary. As an aspiring novelist — I switched from

the dramatic mode to the narrative under the influence of English novelist Charles Williams — I would join the fellowship of those sentenced to myriad tribulations in transit between the capital letter and the period, who weren't finished with a thing until it was done right, even if that meant forgoing the Rapture. The fundamentalist paradigm didn't provide any vocabulary for understanding narrative art.

Partly to fill this gap, in 1979 I became a Catholic. My long journey toward Rome was at turns both arduous and joyful. I was converted by converts — John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day. All four were articulate about their threshold experiences and provided the keys to unlock doors of sacrament, aesthetics, theology, and politics respectively. I recall from my Baptist boyhood the words to a Gospel song that began, “I love to tell the story.” Sacrament — from historical Incarnation to daily Eucharist — teaches me how stories get told. Just as wine becomes blood and bread becomes body, a writer's words on the page lie in wait of transubstantiation. A sacred covenant between author and reader allows the possibility for “material” to transform into “element,” borrowing Suzanne K. Langer's theoretical terms. Mere words on the page of a novel, say, can become lived experience, with the healing potential of incarnate grace.

The aim of art is not, fundamentally, evangelistic. All art is, essentially, sacramental, and the sacrament of narrative art is reversible. For the writer, flesh becomes word; for the reader, word becomes flesh.

Now, some twenty-five years later, I'm a giddy communicant who remains something of a bifurcated Baptist. More accurately, I'm either a Eucharistic evangelical or a Catholic who believes in sword drills. (A "sword drill," if you don't already know, is a ferociously competitive game pitting Sunday school children against one another in a race to find obscure biblical passages. I was skilled at this as a child and, if competition were available still, could probably win a few sword drills today. Once, in seventh grade, my Sunday school teacher challenged all of us boys to recite the books of the Bible faster than he — both Old and New Testaments in accurate, rapid-fire succession. I took Mr. Ohms by a full second, crossing the finish line in twenty-six and a fraction. For this feat, I won a frozen pizza with sausage. Even now, I prefer to recite the books of the Bible lickety-split. Slow me down, and I lose confidence.)

In 2000, I was in Rome for the "Jubilee for Artists," when Pope John Paul II expanded on themes articulated in the "Message to Artists" of Vatican II and his own letter to artists (1999). When inviting us to Rome, Archbishop Francesco Marchisano, president of

the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, penned this amazing sentence — part penance and part promise: “Even if in the recent past the church has found a certain difficulty in approaching contemporary art, she invites artists to come closer to her in order to assume once more their connatural ministry of spokesmen of the divine.”



For the writer, flesh becomes word; for the reader, word becomes flesh.

As a convert, I have found the Roman Catholic Church deeply hospitable. However, many bread-and-buttered “Catlicks” (Flannery O’Connor’s spelling) have not, apparently, and I suppose I can understand why. Artists — whether novelists, sculptors, or musicians — have always been cautious of orthodoxy, uncomfortable with creed. I don’t know if the Roman Catholic Church is any more onerous in its orthodoxy or crushing in its creeds than a fundamentalist Baptist church. But there certainly are more Catholic artists than there are Baptist ones. This is true, partly, for historical reasons. The church used to pay good money for great art. More important, Catholics have a near corner on sacrament, the essence of art.

In the 1960s, Austin Farrer, warden of Keble College, Oxford said, “The process of artistic invention probably casts as much light as anything human on God’s devising of the world.” If this be so, providing artists of faith with a greater comfort zone in the Roman Catholic Church should prove mutually enriching to the body of the artist and the body of Christ alike.

I was talking with my mother on the phone one night, reminding her of the terrible silliness of my boyhood paranoia toward Catholics. (Mother is now an enlightened Presbyterian living in Florida; hence, we can joke about our spiritual blindness of bygone years.) “Remember, Mom, when you used to tell me that Catholics would kidnap a Baptist?”

“Yes,” she said, “I remember.”

I laughed. “Whatever possessed us to believe such a thing, do you think?”

Mother did not laugh. “We believed it, Jimmy, because it was true.”