the province of
JOY

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praying with

Flannery O'Connor

a book of hours

with OCCASIONS FOR MEDITATION



ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL



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The Province of Joy: Praying with Flannery O'Connor

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the province of
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introduction

IN SEARCH OF "THE PROVINCE OF JOY"
Praying with Flannery O'Connor

I say Prime in the morning and sometimes I say Compline at night. . . . I like parts of my prayers to stay the same and part to change. So many prayer books are so awful, but if you stick to the liturgy, you are safe.

(HB, 159–60) (SEE A NOTE ON SOURCES, PAGE 26)

On May 19, 1956, Flannery O'Connor sent a letter containing these words along with the gift of *A Short Breviary* to her friend and correspondent Elizabeth Hester (addressed in O'Connor's letters as "A"). In the course of nine years, the two women exchanged many letters in which they addressed essential questions of faith and doubt, shared key points gleaned from their spiritual reading, and described their faith practices. It is notable that, despite this rich context for discussion of the practice of prayer, rarely does O'Connor discuss her own prayer life. These brief remarks help to clarify this seeming omission. As a Catholic, accustomed to a very particular way of praying prescribed by the church, O'Connor's practice was simple and very much in keeping with her faith tradition. Also, traditional Catholics—

especially those who practiced the faith before Vatican II—tended not to talk a great deal about prayer. The assumption was that fellow Catholics would know the prayers and say them (or not), and non-Catholics would likely not be interested.

With O'Connor's own words as caveat and epigraph, I offer this collection of prayers and readings that bear the stamp of Flannery O'Connor's religious practice and imagination. While it is true that O'Connor was a lifelong Catholic who believed in liturgical prayer, she was also an intellectual (despite her humble assurances to the contrary), a searcher who cut a broad swath through spiritual and theological texts of every stamp. She picked up ideas about the need for prayer and its many forms as practiced by others, saints and sinners alike. This book attempts to bring together O'Connor's relatively spare and simple practice with the richness of the spiritual context within which she lived and out of which she wrote. Each day's collection offers prayers from the Divine Office that she would have said, psalms and biblical passages for contemplation, and quotations from her writings for *lectio divina*. It is an attempt to assemble from materials O'Connor would have invested with authority and significance a prayer book that she would not find "awful," but instead, might see as a helpful guide for those seeking a language and format for prayer that places ancient practice within a contemporary context. It also provides an opportunity to engage the rich theological imagination of Flannery O'Connor, to come into daily contact with her special mode of holiness—one that is grounded in her unswerving love for Christ and characterized by her extraordinary clarity of vision and a fearless commitment to her craft as a means of accomplishing good in the world.

The Life and the Work

Flannery O'Connor is known to most literary-minded readers as one of the finest writers of twentieth-century American fiction. In addition, she is of particular interest to a growing number of readers who are interested in writers who consciously explore the intersection between art and faith.

Born in Savannah on March 25, 1925 (the Feast of the Annunciation, happily enough), she was christened Mary Flannery O'Connor by her parents, Regina Cline and Edward F. O'Connor, both observant Catholics. (She would later drop the "Mary" and use her middle name, instead, as a more fitting—and memorable—pen name for a novelist.) Flannery grew up an only child under their watchful eye, attending parochial school until the family moved to the small town of Milledgeville in 1938. There, she attended a small public laboratory school, associated with the Georgia State College for Women, where she would eventually pursue a bachelor's degree in social sciences. Her reasonably happy childhood, however, came to an end quite suddenly at age fifteen when her father died from lupus, a heredity disease which would, eventually, afflict Flannery and cause her own premature death at the age of thirty-nine.

Much affected by the loss of her father, O'Connor chose to remain close to home during her college years, but set out on her own in 1946 to attend graduate school at the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop. It was there that O'Connor's vocation as a writer became abundantly clear, both to her and to her classmates and mentors. She made important literary connections and found herself, a few months after earning her Master's degree in Fine Arts, pursuing her writing at the

Yaddo Writer's Colony in upstate New York and in New York City. Among O'Connor's friends and colleagues were a number of influential Catholic writers, including translator, poet, and professor Robert Fitzgerald and his wife, Sally. The kinship between O'Connor and the Fitzgeralds was deep, based as it was on their common faith and their common love of the written word as a means of exploring and expressing the truths of their faith. In 1949, O'Connor accepted an invitation to take up residence with the Fitzgerald family in Redding, Connecticut, a peaceful setting (even with the multiple Fitzgerald offspring), one she much preferred to the noise and busy-ness of New York.

In the winter of 1951, O'Connor began to notice lethargy and weakness in her arms. During her return visit to Georgia for the Christmas holidays, she saw the family physician and was diagnosed with lupus. In addition to discovering that she would have to bear the burden of the disease that killed her father, she learned that the treatments necessary to keep her alive would confine her to Georgia for the rest of her life, far from the rich literary and intellectual life she had cultivated and enjoyed for the previous five years. O'Connor would endure this exile gracefully and with good humor until her death on August 3, 1964. She would also continue her writing, despite the painful and debilitating effects of both the disease and the medications prescribed to remedy it. Against all odds, O'Connor would produce two novels, thirty-two short stories, and many essays, reviews, and commentaries in her thirteen years at Andalusia, the family farm where she lived with her mother. In addition, O'Connor became a prolific writer of letters—long, wonderful, old-fashioned letters, exchanged among friends but also with other writers

and with readers who made her acquaintance through her work. This remarkable correspondence became an essential means for O'Connor to continue the rich intellectual and spiritual conversation she had grown accustomed to, and it is in these letters that readers discover the quality and strength of her faith, the complexity of her vision, and the passion she brought to her work and her life in the world.

The Province of Joy

In one of these letters, written on July 14, 1964, just three weeks before her death, O'Connor copied out "The Prayer of St. Raphael" and sent it to her friend Janet McKane. This laborious enterprise was the fulfillment of her promise to share her favorite prayer, one she said every day for many years. Nine years earlier, in a letter to another friend, O'Connor recounted her discovery of this prayer that would, ultimately, become part of her daily office. It had arrived in the mail printed on a card she received from the Catholic Worker. She paraphrased what was, to her, the key line: "The prayer asks St. Raphael to guide us to the province of joy so that we may not be ignorant of the concerns of our true country" (HB, 132).

This line is particularly poignant in light of the difficult circumstances of O'Connor's life. In the face of loneliness, isolation, daily physical pain and limitation, and the psychological burden of living with a fatal disease, her daily prayer to St. Raphael, "the Angel of Happy Meeting," is daily passage to the "province of joy." O'Connor knew that the "true country," the proper destination, orientation, and disposition of a believing Christian, is joy—a word with a

rich history of theological nuance, suggesting as it does both heaven (a place toward which we tend) and paradise (the place where human beings originated). In both cases, joy is a place and circumstance that belongs to us.

Through prayer and through her writing, which served as a kind of prayer for O'Connor, she could place herself on the threshold of that province using the power of word and imagination. Prayer, for O'Connor, was a means of moving from the limited place in which she found herself toward the limitless space of joy, a location that can be occupied in the here and now, as well as looked forward to in eternity. Indeed, prayer becomes both means and end for all of us, an act that propels us toward the prospect of eternity and an experience of the eternal achieved, paradoxically, within the limits of time and physical space. Such prayer provides the pray-er with a foretaste of paradise. As poet Emily Dickinson writes, "Instead of getting to heaven at last / I'm going all along." Given the power of this prayer, in particular, it's no wonder O'Connor felt the need to share it with those dear to her, and we are fortunate to be recipients of this gift, as well.

Praying with Flannery O'Connor

This book of hours is unique in its focus on a Catholic laywoman who is known, primarily, as a fiction writer. However, readers familiar with O'Connor's stories know they are made up of a rich blend of theology and imagination. She is a writer who creates her art from the standpoint of belief and serves as an example of one who is both intellectually and imaginatively engaged and a faithful Christian. Furthermore, she sees

no conflict between these identities. Quite the contrary, her faith informs her art, and her art helps to confirm her faith. Thus, many readers over the last half century have looked to O'Connor for spiritual guidance as well as to be delighted by her stories.

These daily prayers provide an opportunity for readers who are familiar with O'Connor's fiction to deepen their relationship to the spiritual life of its creator. They provide a glimpse into the sacred texts O'Connor knew well, the biblical stories that informed her salvific vision, and the daily language of prayer that inflects her narrative voice.

For those who are, as yet, unfamiliar with O'Connor's writings, this book of hours might serve as introduction to her novels and stories. The intimacy achieved through daily practice of her prayer habits and through meditation on excerpts from her letters and essays will provide, I hope, a foundation on which to build a relationship of even greater understanding and intimacy. While O'Connor is a fellow laborer in the Fields of the Lord, her special labor as a writer is a boon and a blessing to all of us. Her writing bodies forth and clarifies the central tenets of Christian faith bravely and brilliantly. Reading her stories is a means of becoming more fully engaged in the world, of seeing it more clearly, and of perceiving God's living presence among us in the most unexpected places.

PRIME AND COMPLINE

In keeping with O'Connor's personal spiritual practice, this prayer book offers a version of Prime and Compline—Morning and Evening Prayer—for each day of the week. The

order of the readings is based on the order of the Divine Office, and some of the key prayers associated with Prime and Compline are included as well. (More specific information about the nature and ordering of these prayers appears below.)

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The Prime and Compline prayers are supplemented with readings from the Gospels, the letters of the New Testament, and the Psalms. Each day's readings are keyed to a theological theme, one for each day of the week. The seven themes are rooted in key Christian concepts that surface in O'Connor's writings with some frequency and are expressed in the *lectio divina* passages excerpted from O'Connor's work in both Morning and Evening Prayer. These themes, along with a brief explanation of each, are as follows:

SUNDAY: *The Christian Comedy*

The word *comedy* here is used in two senses. Most obviously, comedy suggests a sense of humor, a disposition toward joy and an appreciation of the play of paradox that governs human affairs. O'Connor is known for her great sense of humor. As a keen observer of human nature and of ordinary life, she is aware of the fact that tragedy and comedy cannot be readily separated, and her stories often set these seeming opposites side by side.

In addition, the term *comedy* refers to the literary genre of Comedy, wherein circumstances at the beginning of a play that threaten impending disaster are reversed. Errors are corrected, offenses are forgiven, and divisions are healed, bringing about unity, amity, and general accord at the end of the drama, a

reunion often signified by a marriage celebration. Comedy asserts that Good can come of Evil, and thus serves as a fitting trope for Christian salvation history, wherein the divine plan for human happiness that *seems* to be ruined by the Fall of Adam and Eve ultimately unfolds, as a result of the redeeming power of the Incarnation. Comedy asserts that "nothing is impossible," and the Christian Comedy, in particular, asserts that "nothing is impossible with God." This trope has been used by many spiritual writers and poets, perhaps most famously by Dante in his great poem of salvation, *The Divine Comedy*. A comprehensive artistic and theological vision is one that takes this totality into account and sees that tragedy is unfinished comedy, to the Christian imagination.

MONDAY: *The False Self & the True Self*

O'Connor's characters are often good people who allow themselves to be distracted and misled by idols. Chief among the idols they fall victim to is a false sense of the self they fabricate and try to conform to. Some of her characters even go so far as to rename themselves as part of the effort to remake themselves. If they are fortunate—and open to the operation of grace—they are finally able to recognize the false self for what it is and make a genuine attempt to be the person God created them to be. What is true of O'Connor's characters is true of us all, to some extent. Monday's readings and prayers focus on the necessity of recognizing and shedding the false version of the self and embracing our true identity and purpose.

TUESDAY: *Blindness & Vision*

Another spiritual affliction O'Connor's characters suffer from is moral blindness—a sometimes willful refusal to

recognize and embrace the good. One of the ways in which grace operates in her stories is as a sudden insight or vision occurring to a character, often precipitated, unfortunately, by some violent action or event. But once the person's vision is corrected, he or she finds him or herself in considerably less spiritual peril. Tuesday's readings invite us to ponder instances of this sudden sight among the saints and to contemplate the ways in which our own moral vision might benefit from correction.

WEDNESDAY: *Limitation & Grace*

As a sufferer of lupus, O'Connor knew firsthand about the ways in which suffering could serve as a spring of love and a means to grace. In her letters, she describes with patience, wit, and good humor the gradual diminishment of her physical capacity. Even as she approached her premature death, O'Connor poured herself into her stories (which were labors of love) and her letters (which were gifts to her friends). It comes as no surprise, then, that her stories are filled with characters who suffer physical, mental, and spiritual limitations—missing limbs, bad hearts, poor eyesight, mental retardation, deafness, and muteness—yet it is precisely these afflictions that lead to their salvation and the salvation of others. Wednesday's readings invite us into the sufferings of biblical men and women as a means of understanding our own.

THURSDAY: *The Mystery of Incarnation*

O'Connor's characters often find themselves confounded by the mystery that is at the center of the universe. Many of them have gone through life believing they understood themselves and the people around them, but once they begin

to closely examine their presumptions, they experience the miraculous nature of the world, the presence of the supernatural in the natural, and are filled with awe that enables them to transcend their small and broken selves. Thursday's readings and prayers invite us to meditate on the grace of being embodied and on the imminent presence of the Divine that makes itself known to us through the senses. These prayers serve, in some ways, as a counterpoint to Wednesday's meditations, emphasizing as they do the physical as a means of transcending limitation.

FRIDAY: *Facing the Dragon*

O'Connor read the writings of St. Cyril of Jerusalem and was so struck by the following passage that she chose it as the epigraph to her short story collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*: "The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon." The dragon, who clearly serves as a metaphor for spiritual danger or temptation that waits for the individual soul, can take many forms, and does so in O'Connor's stories. The characters who recognize and do battle with the dragon are those who stand some chance of salvation, whereas those who do not—or those who actually serve as the dragon for others—are most likely to lose their souls. It seems appropriate to spend Friday—the day of the week traditionally associated with Christ's passion and death—contemplating this spiritual danger and praying for the courage to face our dragons when we, inevitably, encounter them.