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AND OTHER ESSAYS

ALSO BY DANA GIOIA

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WRITER TODAY

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Dana Gioia

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IN MEMORIAM

Sister Camilla Cecile
(1896-1985)

&

Sister Mary Damien
(1896-1982)

Who gave me piano and poetry

Gaudete in Domino semper

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I

The Catholic Writer Today

I

*You shall know the truth, and
the truth shall make you odd.*

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

For years I've pondered a cultural and social paradox that diminishes the vitality and diversity of the American arts. This cultural conundrum also reveals the intellectual retreat and creative inertia of American religious life. Stated simply, the paradox is that, although Roman Catholicism constitutes the largest religious and cultural group in the United States, Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in the American fine arts—not in literature, music, sculpture, or painting. This situation not only represents a demographic paradox. It also marks a major historical change—an impoverishment, indeed even a disfigurement—for Catholicism, which has for two millennia played a hugely formative and inspirational role in the arts.

Roman Catholicism now ranks overwhelmingly as the largest religious denomination in the United States with more than 68 million members. (By contrast, the second largest group, Southern Baptists, has 16 million members.) Representing almost one quarter of the American population, Catholics also constitute the largest cultural minority in the nation. Supporting its historical claim of being the “universal” church, American Catholicism displays vast ethnic, national, linguistic, and social diversity. (In my first parish in Washington D.C., it was not unusual at Mass to see Congressional staffers, Central American immigrants, and urban homeless share the same pew.) While most Protestant churches continue to decline, Catholicism has grown steadily for the past two hundred years through a combination of immigration, births, and conversions. On

purely demographic grounds, one would expect to see a huge and growing Catholic presence in the American fine arts.

If one asked an arts journalist to identify a major living painter or sculptor, playwright or choreographer, composer or poet, who was a practicing Catholic, the critic, I suspect, would be unable to offer a single name. He or she could surely identify a few ex-Catholics, such as Andres Serrano, Terrence McNally, or Mark Adamo, who use religious subject matter for satire, censure, or shock value. Catholic exposé is now a mainstream literary genre from the farcical (*Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All*) to the tendentious (*The Gospel According to Mary Magdalene*). If the question were expanded to include novelists—the most sociological of major art forms—a well-informed literary critic might offer a few names such as Ron Hansen or Alice McDermott, authors whose subject matter is often overtly Catholic. Those few figures would account for most of the Catholic artists visible in our culture. The journalist's immediate reaction, however, would be to consider the question itself naïve or silly. Why would a serious critic even bother to know such cultish trivia? Nowadays the arts and Christianity seem only remotely connected, if at all. Contemporary culture is secular culture, is it not?

No one wants quotas for Catholic artists, but does it not seem newsworthy that the religion of one-quarter of the U.S. population has retreated to the point of invisibility in the fine arts? (Catholicism's position in popular entertainment is the subject for another essay.) There is a special irony that this disappearance has occurred during a period when celebrating cultural diversity has become an explicit goal across the American arts. Some kinds of diversity are evidently more equal than others. Has the decline generated cultural controversy? Not especially. Neither the arts world nor the Catholic establishment cares much about the issue. There seems to be a tacit agreement on both sides that, in practice, if not in theory, Catholicism and art no longer mix—a consensus that would have surprised not only Dante but also Jack Kerouac. The consequences of this situation are unfortunate—in different ways—for both the culture and the Church.

The issues at stake are large, complex, and surprisingly slippery. When the problem is discussed, which is seldom, even in Catholic circles, it typically invites abstraction, equivocation, threnody, and rant. To begin a responsible examination, it is necessary to define the topic carefully and then to stay factual and specific. Although the decline of Catholicism has occurred across the arts, this essay will focus on literature, which provides a useful perspective on all of the arts and their relation to the Church. Likewise, examining the situation of Catholic writers helps illuminate the current situation of all Christian writers.

II

*From silly devotions, and sour-faced
saints, good Lord, deliver us.*

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Some definitions and distinctions—both religious and literary—are in order. To examine the situation of Catholic writers and literature, clarity will depend on defining those capacious categories. What is Catholic literature, and what makes an author a Catholic writer? I prefer to define both terms in strict and specific ways.

This essay concerns Catholic imaginative literature—fiction, poetry, drama, and memoir—not theological, scholarly, or devotional writing. Surprisingly little Catholic imaginative literature is explicitly religious; even less is devotional. Most of it touches on religious themes indirectly while addressing other subjects—not sacred topics but profane ones, such as love, war, family, violence, sex, mortality, money, and power. What makes the writing Catholic is that the treatment of these subjects is permeated with a particular worldview.

There is no singular and uniform Catholic worldview, but nevertheless it is possible to describe some general characteristics that

encompass both the faithful and the renegade among the literati. Catholic writers tend to see humanity struggling in a fallen world. They combine a longing for grace and redemption with a deep sense of human imperfection and sin. Evil exists, but the physical world is not evil. Nature is sacramental, shimmering with signs of sacred things. Indeed, all reality is mysteriously charged with the invisible presence of God. Catholics also perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ's passion and death. Catholics also generally take the long view of things—looking back to the time of Christ and the Caesars while also gazing forward toward eternity. (The Latinity of the pre-Vatican II Church sustained a meaningful continuity with the ancient Roman world, reaching even into working-class Los Angeles of the 1960s where I was raised and educated.) Catholicism is also intrinsically communal, a notion that goes far beyond sitting at Mass with the local congregation, extending to a mystical sense of continuity between the living and the dead. Finally, there is a habit of spiritual self-scrutiny and moral examination of conscience—one source of *soi-disant* Catholic guilt.

The Catholic worldview does not require a sacred subject to express its sense of divine immanence. The greatest misunderstanding of Catholic literature is to classify it solely by its subject matter. Such literalism is not only reductive. It ignores precisely those spiritual elements that give the best writing its special value. The religious insights usually emerge naturally out of depictions of worldly existence rather than appear to have been imposed intellectually upon the work.

Catholic literature is rarely pious. In ways that sometimes trouble or puzzle both Protestant and secular readers, Catholic writing tends to be comic, rowdy, rude, and even violent. Catholics generally prefer to write about sinners rather than saints. (It is not only that sinners generally make more interesting protagonists. Their failings also more vividly demonstrate humanity's fallen state.) John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, for example, presents a huge cast of characters, lost souls or reprobates all, who pursuing their assorted vices and delusions hilariously stumble toward grace

and provisional redemption. The same dark comic vision pervades the novels of Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Burgess, and Muriel Spark. Ron Hansen's *Atticus* begins with the investigation of a murder. Flannery O'Connor's fiction is full of resentment, violence, and anger. "Good and evil appear to be joined in every culture at the spine," she observed, and violence is "strangely capable" of returning her characters "to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace." When Mary Karr titled her poetry collection *Sinners Welcome*, she could have been describing the Catholic literary tradition.

The question of who is or isn't a Catholic author also requires a few distinctions. The answer changes depending on how strictly or loosely one defines the term "Catholic." There are at least three degrees of literary Catholicism, each interesting in different ways. First, there are the writers who are practicing Catholics and remain active in the Church. Second, there are cultural Catholics, writers who were raised in the faith and often educated in Catholic schools. Cultural Catholics usually made no dramatic exit from the Church but instead gradually drifted away. Their worldview remains essentially Catholic, though their religious beliefs, if they still have any, are often unorthodox. Finally, there are anti-Catholic Catholics, writers who have broken with the Church but remain obsessed with its failings and injustices, both genuine and imaginary. All three of these groups have legitimate claims to literary attention. This essay, however, will focus mostly on the first group, with some references to the second. These individuals best qualify as Catholic writers, and yet they are currently the least visible in a literary culture where at present only the third group, the dissidents, has any salience.