

I then drove through the heart of Milledgeville and to the property of Andalusia. I wasn't sure what to expect, other than a wooden farmhouse and some fields and trees. I had been praying for a renewal in my academic work, a new direction and a new start, and this desire inspired the visit. Like many visitors, I wanted to gain a better sense of the surroundings that shaped O'Connor's imagination.

After pulling my car into the backyard, I wandered around the house, walked through the screened-in porch and up to the front door, and opened it. The most fascinating room in house contained a bookcase filled with volumes from O'Connor's own library. Her crutches, too, were there—not hundreds as at Lourdes. Just one aluminum pair. The property's director greeted me warmly, and we discussed our enthusiasm for O'Connor's astringent, faith-filled writing.

Afterwards I strolled around the property, and eventually, downhill from the front of the farmhouse, I circled a small pond covered in algae. A photo of it reminds me of O'Connor's description of the unsanitary pool at Lourdes. To my knowledge, no one currently bathes in it or believes its waters to be medicinal, physically or spiritually.

Still, that visit was transformative. I discovered a new subject for my literary criticism and a powerful enthusiasm. As

a Catholic I feel close to O'Connor, as we can to the souls who have gone before us, to all the departed and to the Communion of Saints. As I write essays about her I intuit a deeper connection to O'Connor as a fellow believer and as someone who is both dead and, mysteriously, alive.

I'm certain that I am not alone in perceiving Andalusia to be, if not quite a shrine, a holy place where God was loved, suffering was endured, and witty comments were made amidst many moments of grace. It was the birthplace of several masterpieces of short fiction, and the home of O'Connor, her mother, and her beloved peacocks.

On a fictionalized version of this farm, O'Connor's characters experience visions of God in the world around them. Stains drip down walls like the descent of the Holy Spirit, the sun sets as a blood-drenched Host, and a Christ-like figure stalks unbelievers behind trees. Her stories are unsettling, sometimes shocking, as they communicate the action of grace to a world that has largely turned away from God. Skeptical of Lourdes, O'Connor returned from there a believer in the transformative power of God's grace. Ten years ago this July I had a similar experience at Andalusia.

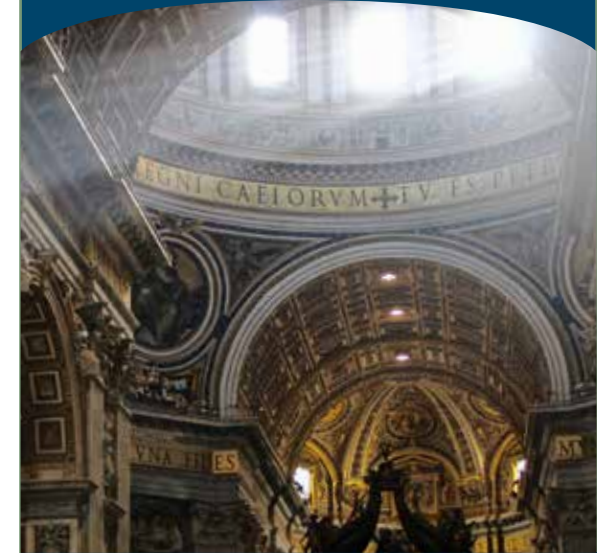
Note: All quotations are taken from *Letters of Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979).

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MONTHLY REFLECTION SERIES

Places of Pilgrimage

Fr. George Piggford, C.S.C.

For many centuries Christians have made pilgrimages to sacred places, first to the Holy Land and later to sites associated with martyrs, holy men and women, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Pilgrimage has long been understood as an act of renewal of faith. Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *The Canterbury Tales* provides one example of a group of pilgrims travelling to a Saint's shrine. Believers continue to take such journeys, most famously to the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal and to the healing waters of Lourdes in France. Visitors to the University of Notre Dame often make a pilgrimage to our own Grotto, one-seventh of the size of the original at Lourdes, where we light candles and offer prayers.

One pilgrim to the original Lourdes grotto was the American Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor, who visited there in 1958 when she was thirty-three years old. She had been suffering the debilitating effects of lupus for almost ten years. As many still do, she went to Lourdes hoping for some relief and spiritual transformation. In 1858 the Virgin Mary appeared there to a young woman named Bernadette Soubirous, and O'Connor's Cousin Katie thought the centenary year of the apparition was a perfect time for the family to make their pilgrimage across the Atlantic from Milledgeville, Georgia, to the French shrine.

After spending time in Italy and visiting Paris, O'Connor traveled with her mother



Regina and a group of American pilgrims to Lourdes. Although O'Connor declared that "I am one of those people who could die for his religion easier than take a bath for it," she journeyed to the holy pool to do just that. After some resistance and "with bad grace," she entered the water with pilgrims from all over the world. She was dismayed by the unsanitary conditions of the common bath, the shared "sack that you take a bath in," and the "thermos bottle of Lourdes water" passed around from pilgrim to pilgrim that "everybody had a drink out of."

"Somebody in Paris told me the miracle at Lourdes is that there are no epidemics, and I found this to be the truth," she later quipped; "apparently nobody catches anything."

After a return to Italy and a blessing by Pope Pius XII at the Vatican, O'Connor and her mother travelled home to Andalusia, their dairy farm just outside Milledgeville in central Georgia. Within a few months O'Connor reported to her friend Elizabeth Hester that "the trip to Lourdes has effected some improvement in my bones," which, according to her doctors, "were beginning to recalcify." Cousin Katie, who was herself very ill in Savannah, was thrilled to hear this.

Despite O'Connor's sardonic comments about the pilgrimage, she believed she had experienced at Lourdes the power of the miraculous. She added in the same letter: "Before we went they told me I would never be off the crutches. Since last week I am being allowed to walk around the house without them."

**“ ... at least I know
that it's possible. ”**

O'Connor even attributed renewed progress on the novel *The Violent Bear It Away* to her experience in the healing waters. "I am by no means finished," she wrote to Hester, "but at least I know that it's possible. I must say I attribute this to Lourdes more than the recalcifying bone. Anyway it means more to me." The

European trip reinvigorated her body and her literary imagination. Even though she would die from lupus in 1964, aged just thirty-nine, she remained grateful to the Virgin Mary and the Lord for the transformation effected by her journey to Lourdes.

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Although I have never been to Lourdes, like O'Connor I have travelled as a pilgrim to Rome and the Vatican, as so many Catholics do. I will never forget how my breath was taken away when I entered St. Peter's Basilica, wandered through that stunning space, and attended a Mass. I have also prayed at Notre Dame's Grotto on many occasions, and I stop there whenever I make the trip to South Bend from Stonehill College in Massachusetts, where I teach American literature. The closest I've ever come to a visit similar to O'Connor's at Lourdes, however, was my first trip to Milledgeville and Andalusia in 2008.

My first stop in Milledgeville was Memory Hill Cemetery and O'Connor's flat stone grave. Some visitors leave peacock feathers or flowers. I brought a rosary made of Jerusalem stone and draped it on the tablet, near the "IHS" (for Iesus Hominum Salvator, Jesus, Savior of Men). I prayed for the repose of O'Connor's soul, and of her father's and mother's, and I asked Flannery to pray for me.