

Introduction

Mysteries of the Faithful, Dreams of the Future

Catholicism is mystery. Or so Flannery O'Connor, perhaps the best-known American Catholic woman writer, suggests in her foundational text, *Mystery and Manners*. “Christian dogma,” she writes, “is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery” (178).² Such a statement proves difficult to dispute, as mysteries abound in the Catholic tradition, and many facets of Catholicism must be taken on faith. For example, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which posits that three persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—exist as one being, can only be understood through belief, not logic. The doctrine of papal infallibility, or the belief that the pope can speak through divine revelation, asserts that he is, in these instances, incapable of error and that his pronouncements cannot be questioned. And the ritual of the Catholic mass is largely based on mystery, particularly the transubstantiation, in which wafer and wine are quite literally transformed, Catholics believe, into the blood and body of Jesus. Theoretically, then, mystery is central to much Catholic teaching.

Practically, however, the mysteries of the church can serve to create problems for some of its constituents, particularly women. The rules and regulations of Rome often limit women’s abilities within the church community and our mobilities within the church hierarchy, preventing Catholic women from achieving

full autonomy and from accessing the highest leadership positions in the church system. Indeed, women bump their heads against the glass ceiling of the church hierarchy before they move very far up at all, as women are denied ordination to the priesthood and thus to entrance into the positions of bishops, cardinals, pope. Female Catholics are also thereby prevented access to one of the seven sacraments. These policies become yet another of the Catholic mysteries, which we are told to accept unquestioned, on faith.

We the editors of this volume have taken the Catholic doctrine of mystery and used it as a way of thinking through women's roles in the church, particularly as women enact unruliness in the face of such unquestionable faith. Our first anthology, *The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers: Critical Essays*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2007, covers varied critical perspectives on both canonical and lesser-known Catholic women writers, all focusing on unruliness in what is commonly thought of as a restrictive site of writing for women: Catholicism. Geared toward scholars of literary criticism and women's studies, this collection addresses issues of gender and religion that remain central to the lives of many women living in the world today.

Following the same spirit of inquiry regarding the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church enables or restricts female unruliness, we now offer a second volume, this time of creative pieces—short stories, poems, personal essays, dramatic works—on the topic of unruly Catholic women. As demonstrated by our first volume, Flannery O'Connor is but one unruly woman; in women's writings on Catholicism, unruliness abounds.

In keeping with the sense of Catholic mystery, we have thus organized our volume around the mysteries of church doctrine: the Joyful Mysteries, the Sorrowful Mysteries, and the Glorious Mysteries of the rosary. In the Roman Catholic tradition, praying the rosary is a form of meditation—often silent and individual, but occasionally public and communal. The rosary demonstrates a form of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary; each of the five decades of the rosary involves praying one Our Father, ten Hail Marys, and one Glory Be. Praying these decades, the devout Catholic meditates on the Mysteries, which invoke a meditation on certain

New Testament events in the life of Mary and her son, Jesus. So the Joyful Mysteries evoke prayers on the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, and the Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple. The Sorrowful Mysteries include the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging at the Pillar, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross, and the Crucifixion. And the Glorious Mysteries consist of the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Assumption of Mary, and the Coronation of Mary.³

The rosary is also a form of prayer most often associated with women. Many of us with Catholic upbringings remember our mothers and our grandmothers, rosaries wound about their fingers, whispering their prayers in the evening as they counted off their beads, then blessing themselves with the crucifix when finished. Such devotion to Mary is often central to Catholic women's faith.⁴ Many women continue to envision Mary as an unruly woman, choosing to become the mother of God, embracing her fate, and standing strong as she watches the murder of her only son. Her inner thoughts on the path her life took remain, of course, a mystery to us.⁵

So we have approached the mysteries of the rosary, and of this first woman of the New Testament, with an eye for the various paths that women take today and the various decisions we make in our lives. Our reading of the Joyful Mysteries continues to invoke motherhood, childbearing, and childrearing, but the writers in this section of our anthology may view those particular mysteries differently, or may make some alternative choices altogether. Our version of the Sorrowful Mysteries still includes stories about pain and death, but we look at other forms of pain that women experience both in and through the church, such as alienation from the church community through divorce or sexuality. And our Glorious Mysteries explore the ways in which Catholic sacrament and ritual, combined with female unruliness, offer new visions for a Catholic future for women. Indeed, many of these stories demonstrate women's willingness, even eagerness, to embrace their Catholic faith, despite the obstacles. As contributor Colleen Shaddox points out, "To be raised Catholic and switch

denominations is a lot like giving up Haagen-Dazs for broccoli. You miss the richness, even if you know it's bad for you.”

Our contributors come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, and their unruliness varies in both form and content. While the genres in this volume range from poetry to nonfiction prose, from fiction to drama, the writers themselves span generations and geography, race and ethnicity, sexuality and socioeconomic status; and their writings represent all stages of life, from birth through childhood and adolescence, from young adulthood to middle age and death. They also represent a wide array of attitudes toward and positions on the religion they address: some are practicing Catholics while others are clearly reticent, retired, or recovering; some are entering the church while others have left it far behind; some defend the mystery and rituals of the religion while others declaim and defame it. Finally, some are authors with considerable records of publication and prizes; others are just emerging into the discipline, finding their way through words as they find their way through a Catholicism that may either welcome or reject them.

We the editors believe that, with the 2012 Vatican censorship of American nuns, there will be a resurgence of interest in literature that addresses the relationship between Catholicism and women. And, indeed, while our contributors also vary greatly in their treatment of the religious sisters—finding them sometimes liberating, sometimes oppressing of other women—we the editors support our fellow women in their feminist struggles against an out-of-touch hierarchy whose priorities seem to be deeply skewed, as they attack nuns who do the real work of Christ and yet defend priests who abuse and molest our children. We hope that our volume may make some small contribution to a growing awakening and awareness of social justice and equality in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as to a Catholic populace currently struggling with issues of loyalty and activism, voice and voicelessness, intellect and faith.

The creative responses to Catholicism found in the following pages speak to us as readers but also to each other, forming a community of women not often found within the confines of the

institutional church. Their collective perspective offers us new ways of probing and, perhaps, solving some of the mysteries the church sets for us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. As O'Connor writes, "The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for" (146).⁶ The unruly Catholic woman writer finds similar mysteries in the church; but, as the following works prove, she most often finds her life to be worth living for.

Notes

1. *The Answer/La Respuesta*. Trans. and ed. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell. New York: The Feminist Press, 1994. 97.

2. Flannery O'Connor. "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers." *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Sel. and ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. 1969. 170–85.

3. In 2002, Pope John Paul II created a new set of mysteries, the Luminous Mysteries, which include the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the Wedding at Cana, Jesus's Proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the Transfiguration, and the Institution of the Eucharist.

4. A good amount of recent scholarship in the area of the medieval worship of Mary has been undertaken. See, for example: Stephen Shoemaker, "Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the Early Dormition Narratives: The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16:3 (2008): 371–401; Susan Carter, "The Diby *Mary Magdalen*: Constructing the *Apostola Apostolorum*." *Studies in Philology* 106:4 (2009): 402–19; and Jeanette Favrot Peterson, "Creating the Virgin of Guadalupe: The Cloth, The Artist and Sources in Sixteenth-Century New Spain." *The Americas* 61:4 (2005): 571–610.

5. More recent scholarship on Mary ranges from theoretical approaches, such as Julia Kristeva's classical essay, "Stabat Mater"; to books, such as Wendy Wright's *Warrior and Peacemaker: Faces of Our Lady in Los Angeles*, Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library, 2008; to scholarly articles such as Mary Hunt's "Women-Church: Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women's Movement." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25:1 (2009): 85–98.

6. Flannery O'Connor. "The Church and the Fiction Writer." *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, op. cit., 144–53.