

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2021

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Flannery O'Connor, *Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends*. Edited by Benjamin B. Alexander. New York: Convergent Books, 2019, xxi + 387 pp., \$26.00 (hardcover).

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Fifteen years after her death in 1964, a collection of Flannery O'Connor's letters was published by her friend Sally Fitzgerald under the title *The Habit of Being*. Full of wit and wisdom, the letters reveal much of the material that O'Connor fashioned into the novels and short stories that continue to charm and haunt readers. Fans of O'Connor have long treasured these letters because of their humor, literary insights, and eclectic book suggestions; but by far the main attraction of the letters is the author herself. After reading more than six hundred pages of correspondence, often quite intimate, to several of her closest associates, one almost feels as though O'Connor were a personal friend. The loss is real when the ravages of lupus abruptly end her life, stories, and letters.

The excitement over a newly edited volume of O'Connor correspondence is therefore hardly surprising, but readers should be aware that Benjamin Alexander's *Good Things Out of Nazareth* offers a different experience than Fitzgerald's *The Habit of Being*. The spotlight remains on O'Connor, but unlike Fitzgerald, Alexander leaves the stage lights partially lit so that readers might better see and learn about the historical context of her letters and the lives of her correspondents. The final word of the book's subtitle makes this clear: *The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends*. Some of these friends are familiar to O'Connor readers, such as Betty Hester, or "A" as she was referred to in *The Habit of Being* (her identity was revealed in 2007). But the collection also contains letters to friends who received little if any attention in

The Habit of Being, folks such as Thomas Gossett who wrote a pioneering work on race in the United States, the scholarly and hardworking Fr. Scott Watson, SJ, and the Missourian writer Ward Allison Dorrance. Not only does Alexander include samples of letters from these correspondents to O'Connor, but also some letters that they sent to one another, some of which are only tangentially about O'Connor. *Good Things Out of Nazareth* also differs from the earlier collection thanks to Alexander's editorial comments that precede nearly every entry, giving the book a much different texture and effect than *The Habit of Being*, where Fitzgerald let O'Connor's letters speak almost entirely for themselves. Taken together, these differences make for a reading experience quite different from what some scholars and fans might expect.

Alexander is not alone in making more O'Connor correspondence available to the public in recent years, but whereas others have focused on O'Connor and a particular correspondent, Alexander's purpose is more general and therefore will have wider appeal. By way of comparison, Christine Flanagan's *The Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon* (University of Georgia Press, 2018) and Patrick Samway's *Flannery O'Connor and Robert Giroux* (Notred Dame University Press, 2018) are both very good books that help us understand two of O'Connor's most important professional friendships. Gordon helped O'Connor become a better writer, and Giroux was the excellent editor who published most of her work. Readers will learn much about O'Connor's development as a writer by diving into the details of these two books. Rather than a depiction of her professional development, Alexander gives us a taste of O'Connor's character and personality. We see, for instance, the intensity of her adherence to the Catholic observation of abstaining from meat on Fridays in a note penned to Fr. James McCown in which she asks if she's sinned by eating vegetables that were likely cooked in ham stock (153); but also a willingness to critique her fellow communicants for their intellectual shallowness, with such remarks as "until Catholics realize that their linen is sometimes going to be hung on the public line, they will not get it in better condition" (189). These and other passages further illustrate O'Connor's penchant for unorthodox defenses of Orthodoxy.

Alexander includes in his volume some of the O'Connor-Gordon correspondence, a healthy taste of the robust meal found in Flanagan's book. Gordon not only provided a keen writer's eye for drafts of O'Connor's fiction, but also the title Alexander adopts both for the book and the first chapter. It comes in a letter to Walker Percy, the New Orleans physician-turned-writer who, like O'Connor, was seeking Gordon's editorial eye for his first novel. That

she should serendipitously be sent the works of two new, Southern, Catholic writers at about the same time was providential in her eyes. “Well this is the season when good things come out of Nazareth,” she wrote, recognizing that we can hardly predict from where those things of the highest value will emerge. Alexander’s title is apt: good things coming from seemingly insignificant places is the general theme that holds the sampling of correspondence in the volume together. Mostly this means O’Connor’s letters from Milledgeville, but also several of her correspondents, like Rosalyn Barnes, whose letters come from small places in South America where she served as a missionary. Barnes’s letters to Fr. James McCown shine with an honesty and charity that give evidence of her vocation’s authenticity. For instance:

One of the things that has hurt, shocked, and scandalized me most is the distortion of love I have found in so many good Catholics. It makes one feel so very bad to be an object of charity, to be used as somebody’s spiritual exercise or good-deed-for-the-day, etc. To be loved “for God’s sake” is so often not to be loved at all. I cannot bear this. For me it is a form of prostitution, and no less disgusting than the form the Church condemns. (337)

Tragically, Barnes disappeared as a missionary in Chile, no doubt a martyr for the faith. Learning more about this remarkable woman is one of the many treasures of Alexander’s book. In one of her letters to McCown, she laments not knowing O’Connor as well as she would have liked; we are left feeling the same way about Barnes.

Another treasure is the exchange between O’Connor and Fr. Scott Watson, SJ, who approached O’Connor’s fiction with a keen awareness of the history of philosophy. His letters to O’Connor are few in number, but highly substantive. His comparisons of O’Connor’s second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, with St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Pascal’s *Pensées*, and Dostoevski’s *The Brothers Karamazov* gives some indication of the breadth of his knowledge and his insight into O’Connor’s talents as a writer with a Christian vision. Reading these books, he explains, is like living through a storm or a bombing, and afterwards feeling oneself “to be at least a year older” (163). This is a helpful expression of the maturation that takes place through serious reading of good books. Fr. Watson’s inclusion of O’Connor on this short list of the great writers is likely to be cheered by many. And as with Barnes, readers close *Good Things Out of Nazareth* wishing to be better acquainted with Fr. Watson.

But, of course, the primary treasure of the book is the host of new material from O'Connor. Her turns of phrase are almost Chestertonian: "Your Catholicism affects your art, no doubt about it, but an intense application to the discipline of an art or even some craft should intensify your Catholicism" (54). Her humor often contains strong traces of wisdom: "[Billy Sessions] is supposed to be studying philosophy but that I can see he isn't doing anything but travelling, from which I guess he will get more in the long run" (121). And her advice about writing is similarly wise, and just as humorous: "If you were stupider you would write better fiction because you wouldn't conceptualize things so much" (187). Comments like these make it difficult to step away from the book, even for a short time.

That O'Connor speaks so clearly for herself in her letters probably explains Fitzgerald's decision to provide only minimal editorial commentaries in *Habit of Being*, and thoughtful readers will have to confront the question whether Alexander might have done well to follow her example. Nearly every letter is preceded by a short introduction. At times these are quite helpful, but they can also be distracting and, what is worse, influence interpretations of the material. Comparisons of O'Connor to Dante and Thomas More and assertions that her historical vision was akin to those of William Faulkner, Shelby Foote, and Walker Percy, all of whom we are told wrote with a "counternarrative to the victory narrative of American exceptionalism rooted in colonial Puritan rhetoric of dissent," all seem a little heavy-handed, even if true (100). One wonders why a comment about O'Connor's vision of history is not followed with a recommendation of her short story "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," which comes down fairly hard on the romanticizing of the South. That said, it is also true that the editorial insertions help readers recognize the significance of certain details in the letters that could easily go unnoticed, such as O'Connor's recommendation of Orestes Brownson or her acquaintance with Russell Kirk. The commentaries, then, are something of a mixed blessing.

But overall the book itself and Alexander's pains in producing it are worthy of high praise. He has given us more of O'Connor, and she is worth knowing. He has also given us more from her correspondents, and having primary sources from them is indeed a great gift. They too are worth knowing. I am, however, mindful at present of the dangers of becoming too intimate with our greatest authors. Their personal lives and opinions can, unfortunately, be a danger to the reputation of their art. We live in an age that likes to take aim at heroes and heroines, and O'Connor has not been

spared attack. If we knew nothing of her outside of her published work, we would know enough to admire her greatly. That much of her hidden life that has been revealed over the years has worked to the advantage of her reputation should not lead us to imagine that this will always be the case. People with nothing better to do than tear down the monuments of the past are hard at work to destroy all historical impurities, and I fear that biographical materials of artists always pose a threat to art. But fear should not have the last word. If it is read with proper caution, and with ample charity, then there is no reason to do anything but thank Alexander for this fine addition to the published correspondence of Flannery O'Connor.