

# VINTAGE

## Saints & Sinners

Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964)

1 *The first entry in A Prayer Journal, written when Flannery was 21.*

Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see; but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. I do not know You God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside.

I want very much to succeed in the world with what I want to do. I have prayed to You about this with my mind and my nerves on it and strung my nerves into a tension over it and said, 'oh God please,' and 'I must,' and 'please, please.' I have not asked You, I feel, in the right way. Let me henceforth ask you with resignation—that not being or meant to be slacking up in prayer but a less frenzied kind—realizing that the frenzy is caused by an eagerness for what I want and not a spiritual trust. I do not wish to presume. I wish to love.

O God please make my mind clear. Please make it clean. I ask You for a greater love for my holy Mother and I ask her for a greater love for You. Please help me get down under things and find where You are.

I do not mean to deny the traditional prayers I have said all my life; I have been saying them and not feeling them. My attention is always very fugitive. This way I have it every instant. I can feel a warmth of love heating me when I think & write this to You. Please do not let the explanations of the psychologists about this make it turn suddenly cold. My intellect is so limited, Lord, that I can only trust in You to preserve me as I should be.

Please help all the ones I love be free from their suffering. Please forgive me.

2 One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation...My audience are the people who think God is dead.....The religious sense seems to be bred out of them in the kind of society we've lived in since the 19th century. And it's bred out of them double quick now by the religious substitutes for religion...If they only believed at least that God has the power to do certain things. There is no sense of the power of God that could produce the Incarnation and Resurrection.

3 My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable....The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take even more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience...You have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.

4 I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened. A faith that just accepts is a child's faith and all right for children, but eventually you have to grow religiously as every other way, though some never do. What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course

it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe. If you feel you can't believe, you must at least do this: keep an open mind. Keep it open toward faith, keep wanting it, keep asking for it, and leave the rest to God....

Whatever you do, anyway, remember that these things are mysteries and that if they were such that we could understand them, they wouldn't be worth understanding. A God you understood would be less than yourself. ...When we get our spiritual house in order, we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.... (to Louise Abbott, 1959)

5 I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting, annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime... I don't think of conversion as being once and for all and that's that. I think once the process is begun and continues that you are continually turning toward God and away from your own egocentricity and that you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it. I measure God by everything that I am not. I begin with that. (letter to 'A', Jan 21, Feb 4, 1961)

*From letters to Emory University college freshman Alfred Corn, May 30, 1962*

6 I think that this experience you are having of losing your faith, or as you think, of having lost it, is an experience that in the long-run belongs to faith; or at least it can belong to faith if faith is still valuable to you, and it must be or you would not have written to me about this.

I don't know how the kind of faith required of a Christian living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be at all if it is not grounded on this experience that you are having right now of unbelief. This may be the case always and not just in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Peter said, 'Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.' It is the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels, and I think it is the foundation prayer of faith.

As a freshman in college you are bombarded with new ideas, or rather pieces of ideas, new frames of reference, an activation of the intellectual life which is only beginning, but which is already running ahead of your lived experience. After a year of this, you think you cannot believe. You are just beginning to realize how difficult it is to have faith and the measure of a commitment to it, but you are too young to decide you don't have faith just because you feel you can't believe. About the only way we know whether we believe or not is by what we do, and I think from your letter that you will not take the path of least resistance in this matter and simply decide that you have lost your faith and that there is nothing you can do about it.

7 One result of the stimulation of your intellectual life that takes place in college is usually a shrinking of the imaginative life. This sounds like a paradox, but I have often found it to be true. Students get so bound up with difficulties such as reconciling the clashing of so many different faiths such as Buddhism, Mohammedism, etc, that they cease to look for God in other ways. [Robert] Bridges once wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins and asked him to tell him how he, Bridges, could believe. He must have expected from Hopkins a long philosophical answer. Hopkins wrote back, "Give alms." He was trying to say to Bridges that God is to be experienced in Charity (in the sense of love for the divine image in human beings). Don't get so entangled with intellectual difficulties that you fail to look for God in this way.

8 The intellectual difficulties have to be met, however, and you will be meeting them for the rest of your life. When you get a reasonable hold on one, another will come to take its place....Where you have absolute solutions, however, you have no need of faith. Faith is what you have in the absence of knowledge. The reason this clash doesn't bother me any longer is because I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. You can't fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories....[Be] a skeptic in the face of much that you are learning, much of which is new



and shocking but which when boiled down becomes less so and takes place in the general scheme of things. What kept me a skeptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read.

9        If you want your faith, you have to work for it. It is a gift, but for very few is it a gift given without any demand for equal time devoted to its cultivation. For every book you read that is anti-Christian, make it your business to read one that presents the other side of the picture; if one isn't satisfactory read others. Don't think that you have to abandon reason to be a Christian....To find out about faith, you have to go to the people who have it and you have to go to the most intelligent ones if you are going to stand up intellectually to agnostics and the general run of pagans that you are going to find in the majority of people around you....

10       Even in the life of a Christian, faith rises and falls like the tides of an invisible sea. It's there, even when he can't see it or feel it, if he wants it to be there. You realize, I think, that it is more valuable, more mysterious, altogether more immense than anything you can learn or decide upon in college. Learn what you can, but cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free – not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your own intellect or the intellects of those around you. I don't know if this is the kind of answer that can help you, but any time you care to write me, I can try to do better.

11       “I hope you'll find the experience you need to make the leap toward Christianity seem the only one to you...Sometimes it may be as simple as asking for it, sometimes not; but don't neglect to ask for it.”