

SAMPLE ARTICLE 1

A POST-VATICAN II, TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY READING OF *A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ*

Peter Gilmour

INTRODUCTION

Let us begin by murmuring the “Blessing of Texts” (28, 133),^{iii]} that ancient prayer intoned “almost as punctiliously as the blessing at meals” (133) by monks of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz immediately before they either wrote or read. These monks were originally “bookleggers” or “memorizers” (65) in a world intent on destroying knowledge. The bookleggers transported books to a safe region to be hidden away. The memorizers imprinted in their minds entire texts so that they could later be transcribed. Isaac Edward Leibowitz, himself one of the original bookleggers, eventually won permission to start a religious order whose work was preserving and interacting with texts. Leibowitz and his original monks realized the scarcity of literacy and the sanctity of interacting with a wide variety of texts: volumes of history, sacred writings, literature, and science (65). They passed this insight from generation to generation in the abbey they constructed. The Blessing of Texts is but a brief ritual reflection of their charism. Today, in the great tradition of St. Leibowitz and the order he founded, we too come together to search out knowledge and wisdom from one specific text.

This text, part of the late 20th century Memorabilia, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, written by Walter M. Miller, Jr. and published in 1959, is divided into three parts: (1) “*Fiat Homo*”; (2) “*Fiat Lux*”; and (3) “*Fiat Voluntas Tua*.” Each part focuses on a distinct time period in the future: Part I is set about 2600 A.D.; Part II about 3200 A.D.; Part III about 3760 A.D. Approximately 600 years elapse between parts.

Like so many others, I am captivated by the mysteriousness of this text. I first read this novel more than twenty-five years ago, and have I made use of it in Religion and Literature classes frequently, both with high school students and graduate students. This novel, part of my personal and professional canon for more than a quarter century, calls forth respect, admiration, and engagement from me.

THE FUTURE

I believe the structure and perspective of this book suggests that the future rather than the past unlocks its ultimate message and meaning. The initial significance of Part I is revealed in the light of Part II, and the significance of the first two parts finally revealed in the light of Part III. Although the entire text, on the surface, is obsessed with the recovery and understanding of a past age’s knowledge and wisdom long since destroyed by “the Flame Deluge,” it is really the future that functions as the novel’s moral compass. Generativity rather than historicism is key to understanding Canticle.

TRADITION

From the viewpoint of religion, the future presents a radically new definition and understanding of tradition. The commonplace understanding of tradition as past experiences and events which function as significant mileposts for guidance and direction in present action is jettisoned by the novel’s structure and perspective. *Canticle* also challenges the more recent developmental understanding which includes present experiences and events along with past mileposts as constitutive partners of tradition. Rather, it is a *tradition of the future* that is established in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. The *tradition of the future* includes those experiences and events yet to happen which function as significant mileposts to understanding the past and guiding present action. This is the point of view on which my post Vatican II, twenty-first century reading of *Canticle* rests.

Today's readers of *Canticle* have a biblical generation separating themselves from the publication of this text. Forty years of the author's future is now part of our past, a mere moment by comparison either to the time epochs *Canticle* embraces or to the more than millennium and a half of monastic practice in Christianity. But, perhaps the many and varied events over the past forty years--advancements, developments, and setbacks--is akin to the nearly six-hundred year caesural stretches in *Canticle* between its three parts.

Since 1959, the Kennedy and King assassinations, feminism, the erection of the Berlin Wall, the sexual revolution, men landing on the moon, space stations, the end of the Cold War, the pandemic of AIDS, the fall of the Soviet Union, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, genetic engineering, the Gulf War, and U.S. military presence and action in Haiti, Somalia, and Kosovo, Postmodernism, and a host of other events, movements, and experiences have become part of this world's history. So too have the Second Vatican Council, New Age spirituality, and the rise of the Religious Right become part of theological history. Archeological discoveries continue to shed light on the cultures that produced what today is the canon of scripture. Heretofore unpublicized questions regarding personal and social, moral and ethical behavior have become commonplace flashpoints for congregations, churches, the media, and civil and ecclesiastical courts. This generation since the publication of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* while short in number of years, has been extraordinarily varied: unique experiences and events have unfolded with heretofore unknown rapidity.

THE LENS OF VATICAN II

From the myriad of events and experiences which comprise a part of the then unknown future at the publication of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, this reader chooses to respond at the threshold of the twenty-first century through the lens of Catholicism's Second Vatican Council. When Walter M. Miller, Jr. wrote this novel, Vatican II was part of an unknown, unimagined future; for readers of *Canticle* today, this council is part of the recognizable, creative recent past. This lens, of course, does not push from view all other experiences and events of this past generation. On the contrary, it includes them because the Second Vatican Council embraced the world. The genesis of the council was Pope John XXIII's desire to have the church become more relevant to, and intimately involved with, the world. The work of the Council linked the church directly to the world. And effects of this Council, while still being worked out in the many diverse precincts of Catholicism, has changed the course of contemporary Catholicism significantly.

THE CHURCH OF *CANTICLE*

The church in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* moves from one turned almost totally inward in Part I, to one involved in the ideas and affairs of the world in Part II, to a church in open conflict with the world in Part III. There are two types of church which transcend the individual parts of this novel which I find particularly fascinating from the perspective of Vatican II: parochial and public. The parochial church consists of the structures, customs, and disciplines of the organization which govern its internal workings. The public church consists of its pronouncements, behaviors, and postures which address and relate to the external world.

THE PAROCHIAL CHURCH

The parochial church of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is filled with interesting and unusual characters, intramural intrigue, and the rules, regulations, and customs of a religious order. Two images of this parochial church, not unrelated, emerge: the church as an unchanging, perfect society, and the religious vocation as the way to perfection.

The church in *Canticle* is presented essentially as a male religious order. It is within the context of vowed religious life that the story unfolds. The numerical presence of women is therefore quite minimal within the story. In fact, it is the male religious order, not any one person, which is the major "character" in this novel. Brother Francis Gerard of Utah, the central figure of Part I, is killed at the end of this section.

Abbot Dom Paulo, the central figure of Part II, dies at the end of this section; and Abbot Dom Zerchi, the central figure of Part III, is doomed to death at the end of this section. Yet the religious order itself survives. In Part III Brother Francis, the obedient though bumbling character from Part I, is referred to as "Venerable," the first stage toward canonization (167).

Miller's representation of church through this religious order embodies an ecclesiology that is a strict and unchanging authoritarian structure. "Keep the Rule and the Rule will keep you," a common proverb of pre-Vatican II religious orders, is adopted without question by Br. Francis. He spends years, for example, repeating the novitiate discipline of a desert experience unquestioning of Abbot Arkos' motivation and judgement. All decision making power, whether the repeated novitiate of Br. Francis in Part I, the invitation of Thon Taddeo to the abbey in Part II, or the placement of the tents in Part III, resides with the Abbot.

The lack of an involved, influential, and gender-balanced laity is a logical by-product of the religious order-centered, parochial church in *Canticle*. The laity are represented *of* the church and the religious *are* the church, a commonly articulated ecclesiology of Pre-Vatican II Catholicism. A "lay functionary" is mentioned briefly and somewhat humorously, for example, in the scene of the canonization that Br. Francis attends in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. There are other lay people, particularly in Part III of the text, but they too are expected to look to the church for answers to significant moral questions.

A LOOK BACK ON MILLER'S PAROCHIAL CHURCH

Forty years after the publication of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* this portrait of the parochial church seems hopelessly out of date. The reality of religious orders, the position of the laity, and the consciousness of women's ecclesial roles have been radically reshaped. Leadership and authority are now seen more as servants than masters. Theology is studied and theological reflection is practiced by ever widening groups of faithful.

The number of people who choose to enter and remain in religious life has diminished greatly these past forty years. The decline in the numbers of priests, brothers, and sisters is a well-documented reality. Their vows or promises are not seen as superior to or disassociated from their baptism. Rather, formalized religious life is seen as one way, not the superior way, to live out a baptismal commitment. In short, religious life is not a fast track to redemption, salvation, and eternity.

The understanding and activity of the laity, particularly women, has also changed radically this past generation. *Lumen Gentium* articulated a new vision of lay members of the church and of the universal call to holiness.^{iii[iii]} Lay leadership and participation in the ministerial life of the church flowing from the rights and responsibilities of baptism rather than either from ordination or the permission of the hierarchy are now growing theologically normative. The stranglehold ordination once held on the ministerial life of the church has been broken. This theology of ministry which undergirds lay participation both in theory and practice is truly one of the radical shifts of the last forty years. Not even science fiction foresaw this incredible shift in theology of ministry.

THE PUBLIC CHURCH

The public church of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* largely with varying degrees of oppositional forces. In Part I, it is the proponents of the Age of Simplification that cause Leibowitz and his followers to preserve and protect what they think to be the world's knowledge. In Part II, long after the Age of Simplification is past, the public church is able to be far more interactive with the culture. In Part III, the public church is a force within the marketplace of the world, working hard to influence political leaders, governmental workers, and its own faithful.

Part I of the novel presents a culture that is so hopelessly hostile that the church cannot be public: by necessity it needs to be secretive. A fortress mentality preserves this church from certain destruction. The

memorabilia, the abbey's small patrimony of knowledge out of the past, had been walled up in underground vaults to protect the priceless writings from both nomads and *soidisant* crusaders of the schismatic Orders, founded to fight the hordes, but turned to random pillaging and sectarian strife. Neither the nomads nor the Military Order of San Pancratz would have valued the abbey's books, but the nomads would have destroyed them for the joy of destruction and the military knights-friars would have burned many of them as "heretical" according to the theology of Vissarion, their Antipope (145).

Its relations with the outside world are but accidental. Yet, it does provide some public service. "The Church had become, quite coincidentally and without meaning to be, the only means whereby news was transmitted from place to place across the continent" (57). It looks forward to the day when hostilities against its mission diminish.

The church itself is also victim to the Flame Deluge and its subsequent obliteration of memory. It does not fully understand its own origins or developments, but, unlike the culture, the church searches for information and insight, answers and explanations to its own questions and concerns. Its religious charisma, the preservation of knowledge, is a radical alternative to the Age of Simplification. In the words of H. Richard Neibuhr, the church of Part I of *Canticle* could be labeled "Christ Against Culture."ⁱⁱⁱ^[iii]

In Part II of *Canticle*, the culture has itself advanced to a stage where knowledge is once again valued. A renaissance in knowledge is taking place, and the church has its part to play. "The Memorabilia could not, of itself, generate a revival of ancient science of high civilization, however, for cultures were begotten by the tribes of Man, not by musty tomes; but the books could help, Dom Paulo hoped; the books could point out directions and offer hints to newly evolving science (146). Even though church and culture share common ground, all is not well. They are suspicious of each others' intelligence and motives, as seen in the dialogue between Monsignor Marcus Apollo and Thon Taddeo Pfardentrott (129). The church is concerned about the ungodly characteristic of scholars and scholarship as well as its own possible lack of mission. Dom Paulo confesses to Benjamin, "For twelve centuries, we've been one little island in a very dark ocean. Keeping the Memorabilia has been a thankless task, but a hallowed one, we think. It's only our *worldly* job, but we've always been bookleggers and memorizers, and it's hard to think that the job's soon to be finished--soon to become unnecessary. I can't believe that somehow" (175). The learned culture has fallen prey to political forces. "He [Thon Taddeo] is a brilliant scholar, but a secular scholar, and a political captive of the State. Here, Hannegan is the State" (134). Both church and culture are hesitant to enter into substantial and meaningful dialogue. "We have to be courteous to Caesar and his kin whether we like him or not" (124). Even though the abbey is now a public part of the world that invites others into its storehouse of knowledge, faith, and reason remain apart.

"We'll just have to take the crucifix down and hang it there, temporarily. There's no other--"

"Heathen!" hissed the librarian. "Pagan! Desecrator!" Armbruster raised trembling hands heavenward. "God help me, lest I tear him apart with these hands! Where will he stop? Take him away, away!" He turned his back on them, his hands still trembling aloft (151).

The emergence of the arts as an independent discipline alongside and in criticism both of religion and science adds further complexity to the relationship between church and culture. The character of the Poet-sirrah appears, a unique and disturbing personality who both is beneficiary of the abbey's hospitality and its caustic critic. This unusual personality, part prophet, part good Samaritan, part disbeliever, ultimately lays down his life for another.

Dom Paulo himself meditates on the nature of art as he sits gazing at the statue of Leibowitz gracing his study:

To survive the Church's slow sifting of the arts, you have to have a surface than can please a righteous simplton; and yet you need a depth beneath that surface to please a discerning sage. The sifting is slow, but it gets a turn of the sifterhandle now and then--when some new prelate inspects his episcopal

chambers and mutters, "Some of this garbage has got to go." The sifter was usually full of dulcet pap. When the old pap was ground out, fresh pap was added. But what was *not* ground out was gold, and it lasted. If a church endured five centuries of priestly bad taste, occasional good taste had, by then usually stripped away most of the transient tripe, had made it a place of majesty that overawed the would-be prettifiers (154).

In Part III of *Canticle*, the public church once again finds itself in opposition to culture. It stands against euthanasia at a time when people are immediately faced with slow, painful deaths. This opposition to euthanasia initially seems like a stridently inflexible church teaching applied without care or concern to the given situation.

Intimately related to the church's opposition to euthanasia is the unique figure of Mrs. Grales, a woman with an additional lifeless head. Mrs. Grales has survived and has found a place in the world because of the church's tradition that has successfully opposed the culture which would have eliminated such mutants. The church has declared such people human, long known as "the Pope's children." She wants her lifeless head, which might be showing signs of life, baptized. The church resists since there is no evidence of intelligent life manifested in this mutant organ.

The church has laid its own plans for the continuation of humanity through the *Quo Peregrinatur* Project. The church takes it upon itself to save both life and the Memorabilia by sending them to another world, which, it is hoped, will be unmarred by the radiation of the new Flame Deluge. The church, in addition to preserving itself and the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, also insures the continuation of human life as it is known and the collected knowledge that has brought humanity to this point in its evolution, for good or ill.

A LOOK BACK ON MILLER'S PUBLIC CHURCH

Forty years after the publication of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* this portrait of the public church rings with relevance. Condemnation of war, particularly nuclear war, abortion and euthanasia, and advocacy for the underclass are hallmarks of the post-Vatican II church.

The Public Church of this past generation has aggressively addressed these issues. Pope Paul VI in his 1965 address to the United Nations bluntly stated: "No more war. War never again."^{iv} The American Catholic Bishops in the early 1980's worked hard and long on a pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace" which was eventually passed and issued by the National Conference of Bishops on May 3, 1983.^v

Abortion too has become a flash point for the public church of this past biblical generation. In fact, abortion has become one of the litmus tests by which faithfulness to the Catholic tradition is measured within some precincts of the church. More comprehensive approaches to the consistent ethic of life, popularly pictured as "a seamless garment" by the late Joseph Cardinal Bernadin, get sidelined because of the single issue mentality focused almost exclusively on abortion among some Catholic hierarchy and organizations.

From the very first pages of *Canticle*, the Church's protection of all forms of life is a given. "That which was born alive, was by the law of the Church and the law of Nature, suffered to live, and helped to maturity if possible, by those who had begotten it." 2) But it is not until the end of the book that the fullness of the wisdom of this teaching is dramatically realized. It does so when Mrs Grales' mutant head known as Rachel comes to life. Unlike other forms of life that are being killed by radiation, this head appears to feed on the radiation filling the air. What will obliterate humanity shortly brings Rachel to life. God has figured out a way to extend and expand life even in the face of humanity's destructive bent. Just as seedlings started sprouting on Mt. St. Helena days after its destructive eruption, the lifeless head of Mrs. Grales comes to life because of the radiation which is killing the rest of humanity.

If the killing of mutant forms of humanity was not opposed by the Church, Mrs. Grails would already be dead. If Mrs. Grailes had submitted to euthanasia, Rachel would not have come to life. And so the church, by standing against culture, ultimately becomes the midwife of a new form of life which will continue past this next Flame Deluge. Culture, if left to its own devices, would have killed what contains the seeds for life's continuance.

CONCLUSION

It is a *tradition of the future* that unlocks the message and meaning of *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Our brief glimpse of the future in the forty years since its publication is but a brief moment in time, but today it happens to be our moment in time. This reading of Canticle embraces both a perspective established by a *tradition of the future* and a perspective established by the events of this past generation.

NOTES

1. Walter M. Miller, Jr. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (NY: Bantam Books, 1997). Subsequent page references in parentheses from this edition.
2. Austin Flannery, (Ed) *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (MN: The Liturgical Press, 1975) p 388-402.
3. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (NY: Harper Colophon Books, 1951) pp, 45-82
4. Pope Paul VI, "Address to the United Nations General Assembly." October 4, 1965.
5. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

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