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Disability and the Resurrection Body in Light of the Works of Flannery O'Connor

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I. Introduction

Theological anthropology is one of the most pressing doctrinal concerns of our times. What does it mean to be human? The question literally stares us in the mirror. We must answer that question before knowing how we must regard others and how we may treat them. We learn what it means to be human in theology first but also in philosophy, science, and medicine. The humanities, as a source for understanding humanity, unfortunately, are often neglected by theologians, scientists, and the rest.

One thing that is common to all human beings is the experience of physical suffering. Medicine and science approach this concern in particular ways, all of which depend upon how those disciplines define the meaning of the human individual. Likewise, theology and the arts speak to suffering in accord with how the person is defined by the theologians and artists. To better know "what we are" in the face of chronic illness and disability, we will turn to traditional Christian dogma about the resurrection. We will also explore the contributions of the Georgian Roman Catholic author Flannery O'Connor, whose work will help us consider the meaning, importance, and potential blessing of disability and illness. Modern people are conditioned to think of disability and suffering as utterly evil. However, as we will see with O'Connor, that is not true in every respect.

There are challenges to this endeavor, because it is not easy to even define the term "disability." Just how functional do your parts and members need to be to qualify you as able-bodied? The answer is relative because, with every movement of every member of your body, there is always someone who can move theirs better. Everyone is disabled in comparison to someone else. We hate the idea of not being able to do all the things we want to do, or that we used to be able to do, or that other people can do. But O'Connor shows that not only woes come from our impairing conditions but also blessings. The chief blessing is to be awakened to our creaturely dependence upon God. Accepting our weaknesses and interdependency with others is a valuable life lesson.

The message of the new creation assures the eradication of our diseases, disfigurements, and disabilities. Indeed, these things are a result of the fall, but they are more than that. They are also helpful means to magnify something that was always

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true of human life, even before sin entered the world: finitude. In contrast to many graduation greeting cards, we cannot become anything we set our minds to. Through her vocation as an author, Flannery O'Connor deflated modern fantasies about self-rule and self-sufficiency and helps us to understand, in her own words, that "limitation is the gateway to reality."[1] This echoes an earlier observation by French mystical philosopher Simone Weil, who said that "limitation is evidence that God loves us."[2] In other words, the very conditions that constrain us prepare us to meet the One for whom nothing is impossible.

II. Who Was Flannery O'Connor?

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925 and died in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine. She lived in Milledgeville, Georgia, and earned an MFA at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. In her career, O'Connor wrote two novels, thirty-one short stories, and many essays, speeches, cartoons, letters, journals, and prayers. She was a devout Roman Catholic residing in the Fundamentalist Jim Crow South who attended daily mass and read Thomas Aquinas devotionally. She was diagnosed with lupus in 1950, which led her to return to live with her mother on Andalusia, their dairy farm in Milledgeville. She died from complications of lupus in 1964. As a writer, she is well-known as a representative of the Southern Gothic style.

Throughout her life, Flannery was seen as strange, standoffish, and fascinating. Her sarcastic wit, coupled with her cleverness, drew many and repelled others. In one place, she described her childhood self as "a [pigeon-toed], only-child with a receding chin and a you-leave-me-alone-or-I'll-bite-you complex."[3] And of her upbringing, she remarked, "I come from a family where the only emotion respectable to show is irritation. In some, this tendency produces hives, in others literature, in me both."[4] Biting humor is speckled throughout her stories but is also richly evident in her letters and essays.

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[1] Flannery O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 59.

[2] Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Putnam, 1952), 73.

[3] Brad Gooch, *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009), 30.

[4] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday, 1995), 164.

The Vocation of a Christian Author

O'Connor had a strong sense of calling as an author.[5] She knew she served God best as a writer, and she cultivated her craft. Writing fiction, she believed, was not just about the self-expression of the author, nor was it merely to entertain the reader; it was supposed to help people see the world more clearly. She believed it was the role of the author to contend with the blind spots of the age and, as Saint Paul put it, "to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness" (Eph 5:11 NIV).

Critics of Flannery O'Connor often ask why she wrote about such unhappy situations. Does not the book of Philippians say that we should think about things that are lovely, commendable, and worthy of praise (Phil 4:8–9)? Yes, she would say, but the first item Paul lists in that directive is to think about things that are true. We tell the truth, whether it is ostensibly good and beautiful or not. As she explained in a letter to her friend Betty Hester in 1955, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally. A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason and there are long periods in the lives of us all, and of the saints, when the truth as revealed by faith is hideous, emotionally disturbing, downright repulsive."[6] These are not the words of someone who thinks that escapism is the purpose of art.

Some could not understand how, in that postwar time of prosperity, she could miss, as one editor said, "the joy of life itself."[7] In response, she stated that authors with a Christian perspective will not be impressed with America's power and wealth. Instead, they will likely find darkness in them.[8] She did not believe that unquestioned optimism was a faithful response to the human state of affairs, even in the US of A.

But through it all, O'Connor never succumbed to nihilism. She was a woman on a mission. She shared in one place that Saint Cyril of Jerusalem told his catechumens this: "The dragon sits by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware lest he devour you. We go to the Father of Souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon."[9] She explained that "no matter what form the dragon may take," we must

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[5] Flannery O'Connor and William A. Sessions, *A Prayer Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[6] In Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Library of America, 1988), 952.

[7] Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," in Fitzgerald and Fitzgerald, *Mystery and Manners*, 26.

[8] "What these editorial writers fail to realize is that the writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view of all of what he sees in this country today. For him, the fact that we are the most powerful and wealthiest nation in the world doesn't mean a thing in any positive sense." O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," 26. She added, "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (33).

[9] O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," 35.

point out the errors and distortions of the times so that others know when to walk on the other side of the road. This is not to avoid just the big-picture errors of the age but also the hellishness in the heart of every human being.

Writing the Grotesque

Southern Gothic writers like Flannery O'Connor utilized the grotesque, an artistic style that tries to jar readers with dark humor and repulsive characters, often in violent and disturbing situations, into seeing something they would not otherwise see or would prefer to ignore. According to O'Connor, this approach is more necessary now than at other times. She said that "when you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; . . . [but] when you have to assume that it does not [hold the same beliefs you do], then 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."[10] Christians have seen this principle at work before. The prophets in the Bible were frequently extraordinary characters with bizarre habits and words, not averse to causing shock and disrupting societal norms. And a few of them resorted to bloodshed.

O'Connor believed that we need the kind of moral education that the grotesque can provide. This is because many people only awaken to their need for salvation in the face of tragedy. O'Connor's fiction employs emotional or physical violence to destabilize the reader's sense of autonomy. Brutality is often an act of grace or the beginning of one. As the psalmist writes, "When he killed them, they sought him; they repented and sought God earnestly" (Ps 78:34 ESV). That is disturbing language. God's law must kill so that the gospel can make alive. The surgeon must hurt his patient before the patient can heal. In her prayer journal, O'Connor wrote, "Hell, a literal hell, is our only hope. Take it away and we will become wholly a wasteland not a half a one. Sin is a great thing as long as it's recognized. It leads a good many people to God who wouldn't get there otherwise."[11] This is nothing other than a statement of what Lutherans call the second function of the law. You must recognize your sin for what it is. Self-justifying humans need to be brought to the brink before they can see the way out. And that part of our redemption will not be cheerful.

In another place, Flannery wrote, "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about 'freaks,' I say it is because we are still able to recognize one."[12] Is this because she thought that Southerners were freaks

[10] O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," 34.

[11] O'Connor and Sessions, *Prayer Journal*, 26.

[12] Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in Fitzgerald and Fitzgerald, *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

themselves? No. It is because they lost the war. They had seen their civilization collapse.[13] They are disabused of the Enlightenment delusion that humans can save the world. That gives Southerners a certain clarity, she believed. They know what brokenness looks like. For her, the one-legged Heideggerian, the hermaphrodite, and the escaped serial killer are not the true freaks, just like the prostitutes and tax collectors are not the worst sinners. She thought that the real freaks are the men wearing gray flannel suits working in respectable suburban offices, stupefied by affluence and comfort into thinking they are basically OK.[14]

O'Connor's characters are more likely to experience a religious awakening from being gored by a bull than from reading a spotless gold-leaf study Bible.[15] She believed that her literary displays of human brokenness could bring us closer to the truth about humanity than could best-selling paperback bromides, because they make it clear that we are inherently dependent beings. We are helpless. Self-sufficiency is a fantasy, and the poor, sick, and weary know it best. It is only those who are temporarily able-bodied who think they can take care of themselves. However, O'Connor's kind of truth-telling rankles idealists. The notion of our essential dependency is incompatible with the Enlightenment mindset, which is evident in this society's fixation on personal autonomy.[16]

III. Secular Soteriology and Secular Eschatology

The belief that we can save ourselves is the great sin of scientism. O'Connor observed that since the eighteenth century, Western societies have convinced themselves that "the ills and mysteries of life" will be abolished by scientific advancements, even after it became clear that those very advancements could lead to our total extinction.[17] You do not have to be a Georgian Catholic writer of the Southern Gothic school to make this out. Surgeon and Yale professor Sherwin B. Nuland

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[13] "O'Connor believed that her region's narrative and historical rootedness in Scripture, together with the tragic vision enabled by the Civil War, had protected it from this dilution of religious conviction." Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 104. "When Walker Percy won the National Book Award, newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, 'Because we lost the War.' He didn't mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject matter. What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not developed in the rest of our country." O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," 59.

[14] O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque," 50.

[15] See O'Connor's story "Greenleaf."

[16] We see this exemplified in the world of secular bioethics, for instance.

[17] "Since the eighteenth century, the popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man, a belief that is still going strong even though this is the first generation to face total extinction because of these advances." O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque," 41.

writes in his book *How We Die*, "I believe that the fantasy of controlling nature lies at the very basis of modern science."[18] Fantasy, he says. Harvard philosopher Michael J. Sandel echoes this view and complains that we are plagued by "a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires."[19] Modern science and progressive education have promised that with the refined application of rational accomplishments, the world will get better every day and in every way. O'Connor, Nuland, and Sandel, though very different from each other in a multitude of respects, all recognize that prioritizing human will and desire over receptivity and trust is antihuman.

Secular soteriology and secular eschatology, the hope of do-it-yourself human betterment, are rooted in technological optimism and are well represented by the movement known as transhumanism. The "Transhumanist Declaration" of 2009 confesses, "Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth."[20] Inventor and futurist Raymond Kurzweil is a foremost transhumanist, as you can see from the interviews in the documentary about him, *Transcendent Man*. Steve Rabinowitz, a college friend of Kurzweil's, said, "Ray's goals were to invent things so that the blind could see, so the deaf could hear, and the lame could walk."[21] Does this sound familiar? When someone asked Kurzweil "Does God exist?" his answer was "Not yet."[22] According to the transhumanists, a Nietzschean Übermensch may yet come—that is to say, in their case, a *techno-sapiens*. Enlightenment eschatology and science-as-sacrament promote the empty promises of Satan: "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen 3:5 KJV). This is bad enough. But Flannery O'Connor recognized that the dangers to humanity do not spring just from the secular head, but that equally menacing is the secular heart.

The Hazards of Sentimentality

There is nothing sentimental about O'Connor's fiction. She defines sentimentality as tenderness lacking a spiritual foundation. "In this absence of this faith now,

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[18] Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (New York: Random House, 1993), 256.

[19] Michael J. Sandel, "The Case Against Perfection: What's Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2004, 54.

Consider also Sandel's longer treatment: Michael J. Sandel, *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2009).

[20] "The Transhumanist Declaration," Humanity+, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-declaration/.

[21] *Transcendent Man*, directed by Barry Ptolemy, 2009, streaming video, https://transcendentman.com/, 15:29.

[22] *Transcendent Man*, 1:19:39.

we govern by tenderness," she wrote. "It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps in the fumes of the gas chambers."[23] She means that every utopian dream, like scientism, arises from wanting to improve things and help people. The road to totalitarianism is paved with good intentions. Everyone is just trying to make the world a better place. But the modern versions of those visions are estranged from God, who is our only help, and that upends the whole affair.

Today, instead of tenderness, the governing byword is "compassion." It takes us to the same destination. Thus now, one might paraphrase her quote this way: "In this absence of this faith now, we govern by compassion. It is a compassion which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When compassion is detached from the source of compassion, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in abortion and euthanasia." In medical ethics and healthcare, "compassion" is used to defend deadly embryonic research, adventurous genetic manipulation, physician-assisted suicide, and the commodification of persons, among other evils. When tenderness, compassion, and sentiment are isolated from divine love, they generally result in a deadly utilitarian calculus devised to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. The goal becomes the greatest happiness for the greatest number, by hell or high water. O'Connor recognized the dangers and prayed, "My God, take away these boils and blisters and warts of sick romanticism."[24]

A world—or a church—that lacks the crucifixion as its guiding image makes comfort and pleasure, or at least pleasantness, the supreme values. There is no space for cross-bearing or redemptive suffering in that environment. Furthermore, in affluent societies like ours, the definition of suffering has been expanded to include boredom, discomfort, and inconvenience. To those who always seek consolation by means of the right drug, the newest therapy, and the latest artifact of technology, the continuing existence of intractable suffering is an embarrassment, a signal of failure. When finding no transcendent meaning in human misery, the elimination of suffering at any cost becomes paramount. Jack Kevorkian's defense attorney even said that people have a *right* not to suffer.[25] If that is true, the rational remedy to the problem of pain is to eliminate the one who hurts. At that point, the link between

[23] Flannery O'Connor, introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, in Fitzgerald and Fitzgerald, *Mystery and Manners*, 226.

[24] O'Connor and Sessions, *Prayer Journal*, 32.

[25] "Assisted Suicide Issues," National Press Club, July 29, 1996, aired on C-SPAN2, https://www.c-span.org/program/national-press-club/assisted-suicide-issues/57789/.

compassion and actively killing people becomes clear,[26] and the "misanthropic anthropocentrism" so prominent in modern history overshadows us.[27]

Disability and Danger

Human beings have a long history of harmful attitudes and behaviors toward people who fail to meet standard physical or cognitive expectations. Consider that it is a familiar trope for atypical bodies and neurodivergent minds to be represented in films and stories as dangerous. Examples include Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*, Darth Vader in *Star Wars*, Freddy Krueger in *The Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and the Joker in *Batman*. In those cases, the villain is identified as the one with the biggest scar, as it were.

Disability is often portrayed as a source of shame, something to be hidden,[28] somehow linked to moral failure (John 9), or a particular instance of divine disapproval. It elicits fear, disgust, and even amusement, as in the case of circus sideshows or Saturday-morning cartoons. Generations grew up laughing at Mr. Magoo for mistaking a lampshade for his wife, or Porky Pig's inability to get a word out.

In many cultural expressions, people with asymmetrical and misshapen bodies are thought to imply a world gone berserk. Their appearances recall the undeveloped chaos that existed before God spoke world into being. They are *tohu wa bohu* and portend the unraveling of creation.[29] This terrifies the spectator. So, by all means, one might be led to think the disabled must be hidden, corrected, prevented, or destroyed.

The Eugenics Movement Goes to Church

This brings us to consider the early twentieth-century Anglo-American eugenics movement, a project that enjoyed the support of many churches, especially those of the Social Gospel variety, but elements of which could also be found in the conservative Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).

Eugenics has long been a pillar in the drive to improve the world. One oft-favored tactic in the eugenics strategy has been the coercive sterilization of those

[26] Timothy J. Basselin, *Flannery O'Connor: Writing a Theology of Disabled Humanity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2013), 27.

[27] Ralph Wood, "Flannery O'Connor's Witness to the Gospel of Life," *VOEGELINVIEW*, May 22, 2020, https://voegelinview.com/flannery-oconnors-witness-to-the-gospel-of-life/.

[28] Consider the so-called "Ugly Laws"—for example, the San Francisco ordinance in 1867 that made it illegal for "any person, who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or deformed in any way, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object, to expose himself or herself to public view." Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 291.

[29] A reference to the Hebrew words of Gen 1:2, translated as "without form and void" in the ESV.

deemed unfit to procreate. Practices such as this are always justified in the name of benevolence—benevolence toward some but not others, of course. The eugenics movement in America—in the first decades of the last century—maintained the belief that compassion requires us to strive to oversee an improved human stock.

Note that one of the primary textbooks of pastoral theology used at LCMS seminaries for two generations contained eugenic guidance.[30] The author is John H. Fritz:

> Is it permissible that an imbecile or moron be sterilized? If upon reliable medical examination it has been established that a person is incurably so afflicted for his lifetime and that sterilization is necessary to safeguard society against such a person, then one need not object to sterilization because the divine institution of marriage was not intended to produce beings which are inevitably a liability and a curse to mankind, but rather beings who can establish a home and in accordance with the divine ordinance exercise control over all living things.—Such is the view taken by the State for its self-preservation. While the Church does not oppose it, it does not recommend it.[31]

Today, the terms "imbecile" and "moron" are informal insults of a person's intelligence. However, they were considered legitimate scientific classifications in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[32] Fritz was merely following the science. Such attitudes toward disability in the churches reflect a clear interest in genetic hygiene, so to speak.[33] Yes, Fritz wrote that "the Church does not recommend it." But no matter what he wrote, defending forced sterilization because of the divine institution of marriage and in accordance with a divine ordinance certainly seems like a recommendation, if not a mandate.

Salvation According to a Rationalist

The Enlightenment agenda says that progressive scientific education is the way to overcome social ills. Flannery O'Connor's story "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1962) is her response to this shaky promise.[34] The protagonist is a man named

[30] Thanks to my friend Dr. Todd A. Peperkorn for pointing this out to me.

[31] John H. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), 156.

[32] An idiot was a person with an IQ between 0 and 25, an imbecile between 26 and 50, and a moron between 51 and 70.

[33] Interestingly, the 1932 edition of Fritz makes no mention of sterilization. This remark would make more sense if it were found in the earlier 1932 edition, as that was at the peak of the American eugenics movement, whereas by 1945, for obvious historical reasons, such talk was much out of favor.

[34] In Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 595–632.

Sheppard, a rationalist who had embraced the modernist gospel of education as the principal means of uplift.[35]

Sheppard was a widower who had a ten–year-old son named Norton. We learn right away that the boy was still grieving the death of his mother a year later, which his father found excessive. Throughout the story, Sheppard was impatient with his son's emotional needs. He believed Norton was slow-witted and selfish, a child without much promise.

Sheppard was also a counselor at a reform school for miscreant boys. One day, a particular juvenile delinquent named Rufus Johnson came to his office with a clubfoot. Most of O'Connor's stories highlight characters facing physical or cognitive obstacles. Our protagonist was intrigued by Rufus because the teen displayed exceptional intelligence, though he would not stay in school and kept getting arrested for breaking into people's homes. Here was a young man who endured many disadvantages. His father had died before he was born. His mother was in the state penitentiary. And "he was raised by his grandfather in a shack without water or electricity and the old man beat him every day."[36] On top of those challenges, Rufus had a serious physical deformity, which made it difficult for him to walk.

Sheppard decided to take the boy on as his personal project. Rufus was "the most intelligent boy he had worked with and the most deprived."[37] When the teen was released from the institution, Sheppard happened to see him rummaging for food in a dumpster and invited him to live with him and Norton. Sheppard believed he could save Rufus. The raw materials were all there. All the youth needed was a good home environment, proper healthcare, and a progressive education. That, Sheppard believed, would turn Rufus around. He purchased Rufus a set of encyclopedias, which the young man read in the evenings. He bought him a telescope and told him he could one day walk on the moon. He also gave him a microscope with prepared slides to study. Sheppard told him, "I believe you can make anything of yourself that you set your mind to."[38]

In typical Flannery fashion, the story's cruelest character is the one with the clearest bead on human nature. Rufus Johnson knew his Bible well and understood that he was fatally flawed because of sin, something secular soteriology cannot address. He believed that only Jesus could save him, not a messianic social worker like Sheppard. He knew that he would go to hell too unless he repented. He was just not sure that he *wanted* to repent. He believed the gospel to be true, but he did not like

[35] The character named Rayber in Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960) has a similar outlook.

[36] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 596.

[37] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 597.

[38] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 619.

it very much. With Sheppard in mind, Rufus carped, "Yakkety, yak . . . and never says a thing. . . . I don't care if he's good or not. He ain't *right*."[39] Rufus added, "He thinks he's Jesus Christ."[40] The youth asserted that no do-gooder social reformer would save him; only Jesus could do that.

As the two boys looked through the telescope together one night, the older boy told Sheppard's son that if he looked at the sky hard enough, he might be able to see his mother in heaven—that is, unless she was not a believer. In that case, Rufus threatened, she would be in hell. Naturally, the suggestion that his mother might be in torment put Norton into distress. His atheist father tried to explain that his mother was not in hell nor in heaven. She simply did not exist anymore. Cold comfort, that.

In the end, Rufus got arrested for attempted burglary. He lied to a reporter, saying that Sheppard made sexual overtures to him. In the end, Sheppard's attempt to rehabilitate the youth with his secular creed had failed in the most catastrophic manner. Stunned and defeated, he kept telling himself, "I have nothing to reproach myself with. I did more for him than I did for my own child."[41] Then suddenly, he remembered the last words Rufus spoke to him: "Satan has you in his power."[42] And he "heard his own voice as if it were the voice of his accuser."[43]

Sheppard had become his own Satan. And as he realized the absurdity of his self-justification—"I have nothing to reproach myself with. I did more for him than I did for my own child"—a kind of conversion occurred. His heart constricted. O'Connor writes, "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works. . . . He had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself. He saw the clear-eyed Devil, the sounder of hearts, leering at him from the eyes of [Rufus] Johnson. His image of himself shriveled until everything was black before him. He sat there paralyzed and aghast."[44] And then: "A rush of agonizing love for [Norton] rushed over him like a transfusion of life. The little boy's face appeared to him transformed; the image of his salvation, all light. He groaned with joy. He would make everything up to him. He would never let him suffer again. He would be mother and father. He jumped up and ran to his room to kiss him and tell him that he loved him and would never fail him again."[45] But it was not to be. There would be no happy ending.

When Sheppard found his son, "the telescope lay on the floor. A few feet over it, the child hung in the jungle of shadow, just below the beam from which he had

[39] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 604.
[40] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 609.
[41] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 631.
[42] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 631.
[43] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 632.
[44] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 632.
[45] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 632.

launched his flight into space."[46] Norton committed suicide because he thought he saw his mother among the stars, and he wanted to go to be with her. The materialistic eschatology of his father, that his deceased mother was now nothing, was too terrible to live with.

Sheppard had failed to shepherd his own son. He had despised little Norton for being simpleminded and for worrying about nonsense such as the afterlife. He had also failed to save Rufus even though he had provided him with food and shelter, advanced medical equipment to help him walk, and a scientific education. Every rationalistic, materialistic effort to make the world a better place, when it is divorced from God, lands in death and bondage and ruin. Thus, we have secular soteriology and secular eschatology.

IV. Sacred Soteriology and Sacred Eschatology

In the field of disability theology, many theorists disagree with aspects of scientism but for different reasons than more traditional theologians. In fact, those scholars see the transhumanists and the New Testament authors as two sides of the same coin when it comes to people living with disability. Why, they ask, must the blind see and the lame walk, necessarily? Theologians like Amos Yong and Nancy Eiesland indict the church and even the Scriptures themselves for promoting a harmful ableist mindset that stigmatizes people with unconventional bodies. [47] The view is that problematizing disability results in problematizing people. Are the healing miracles of Jesus demeaning? Is disability constitutive of one's identity? Some theologians think so.

Yong, Eiesland, and others argue that disabilities can be such a part of personal identity that traditional approaches can legitimate the marginalization that people receive here and now. And to lose those characteristics would be tantamount to erasing the person. As Stanley Hauerwas has said, "To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject."[48] If that is true, then the historic Christian understandings of the resurrection body truly have been oppressive. The great tradition, as we will see, however, disagrees with Stanley Hauerwas. Cyril of Alexandria, for example, wrote that on the Last Day, the lame will walk and the blind will see. In his commentary on John, he states, "At the time of the resurrection there will be no remnant of

[46] O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," 632.

[47] "It cannot be denied that the biblical record and Christian theology have often been dangerous for persons with disabilities." Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 82.

[48] Stanley Hauerwas, "Marginalizing the 'Retarded,'" in *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life*, ed. Flavian Dougherty (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1984), 69.

adventitious [accident, not essence] corruption left in us."[49] Restoration will occur, and no transhumanist manifesto will be required.

The Resurrection Body: Continuity and Difference

Key to our understanding of disability and the resurrection body is a discussion on the continuity that will exist for the person before and after his own resurrection. In the first place, the church fathers condemned the Platonic idea of metempsychosis (transmigration of souls, or reincarnation) as a description of the future life. Instead, they taught that our current bodies and our future glorified ones are the same. That is necessary because one's natural body is an essential aspect of his or her personal identity, a truth widely denied today.[50] Your *you* is not just your spirit, which can hop from vessel to vessel essentially unchanged, but you are your body-spirit composite, one person. One's particular body is not just a prosthesis for the spirit or an interchangeable piece of equipment that may be scrapped and replaced. To transfer a person's soul to a body other than the one he received at conception would be to alter that person into someone else.

Against the theory of metempsychosis, Tertullian wrote, "Let our own people, moreover, bear this in mind, that souls are to receive back at the resurrection the self-same bodies in which they died."[51] He also wrote, "How much more worthy of acceptance is our belief which maintains that they will return to the same bodies! And how much more ridiculous is your inherited conceit, that the human spirit is to reappear in a dog, or a mule, or a peacock!"[52] Tertullian's contemporary, Hippolytus of Rome, also opposed the idea of the transmigration of souls, saying that God "will accomplish a resurrection of all, not by transferring souls into other bodies, but by raising the bodies themselves."[53] The undeniable orthodox answer is that

[49] Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel according to S. John*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, 1885), 685–686.

[50] "Within this same cultural climate, the body is no longer perceived as proper personal reality, a sign and place of relations with others, with God and with the world. It is reduced to pure materiality: it is simply a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency." [John Paul II], *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, sec. 23, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

[51] Tertullian, "A Treatise on the Soul," trans. Peter Holmes, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:232 (hereafter cited as *ANF*).

[52] Tertullian, "Ad Nationes," trans. Peter Holmes, in *ANF* 3:127.

[53] Hippolytus of Rome, "Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe," trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *ANF* 5:222. Hippolytus also held the interesting opinion that while the righteous will lose their pain and suffering, the unrighteous will be raised with their illnesses and disabilities intact. "But the unrighteous will receive their bodies unchanged, and unransomed from suffering and disease, and unglorified, and still with all the ills in which they died. And whatever manner of persons they

resurrected bodies will be the same constitutionally as before, but without the corruption of the fall.

Granted that our future bodies will be the very same as we have now, though changed (1 Cor 15:52), the question emerges whether our present disabilities also continue in any sense beyond the judgment. According to Justin Martyr, they will not. His position is that we will be perfected in toto and restored to God's creational intentions on the Last Day, and the healing miracles of Jesus are signs that point to that promise. He wrote, "For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed."[54] For Justin, one significance of the healing miracles in the Bible is their relationship to life in the eschaton. The former prefigure the latter.

This belief is repeated in a modern statement on anointing and healing from the United Lutheran Church in America (1962). It says, "Viewed from the central message of Scripture they [miracles] are one kind of sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They are foretastes of our resurrection. . . . Miraculous healings . . . had unmistakable eschatological implications."[55] What some disability theologians see as the discriminatory ableism of biblical healing miracles, at least as those texts are traditionally interpreted,[56] are better understood as attestations of the new heaven

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(were when they) lived without faith, as such they shall be faithfully judged. Hippolytus of Rome, "Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe," trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *ANF* 5:222.

[54] "[F]or even if any one be labouring under a defect of body, yet be an observer of the doctrines delivered by Him, He shall raise him up at His second advent perfectly sound, after He has made him immortal, and incorruptible, and free from grief." Justin Martyr, "Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew," in *ANF* 1:233. Elsewhere he wrote,

> Well, they say, if then the flesh rise, it must rise the same as it falls; so that if it die with one eye, it must rise one-eyed; if lame, lame; if defective in any part of the body, in this part the man must rise deficient. How truly blinded are they in the eyes of their hearts! For they have not seen on the earth blind men seeing again, and the lame walking by His word. All things which the Saviour did, He did in the first place in order that what was spoken concerning Him in the prophets might be fulfilled, "that the blind should receive sight, and the deaf hear," and so on; but also to induce the belief that in the resurrection the flesh shall rise entire. For if on earth He healed the sicknesses of the flesh, and made the body whole, much more will He do this in the resurrection, so that the flesh shall rise perfect and entire. In this manner, then, shall those dreaded difficulties of theirs be healed. (Justin Martyr, "Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection," trans. M. Dods, in *ANF* 1:295)

[55] *Anointing and Healing: Statement Adopted by the Adjourned Meeting of the 1960 Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America, June 25–27, 1962, Detroit, Michigan* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication of the ULCA, 1962), 21.

[56] "Taken in their plain and literal sense, these texts have functioned to stigmatize disability in the theological tradition." Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 18. "Similarly, I suggest that any theology of disability for the twenty-first century will have to acknowledge and confront the conventional understandings of disability manifest in the biblical text (which we have done in this chapter), but yet

and new earth inaugurated already by Jesus Christ. Therefore, those accounts cannot be instruments of oppression. They are instead seen by the Christian as joyous epiphanies of what our true humanity is like.

According to Augustine, deformities and so-called "ugly excrescences" also serve the timely purpose of reminding us of the "penal condition of mortal life."[57] These burdens, as consequences of original sin, tell us that we are under a curse. Thus, they are temporary, at least for the Christian. They will fall away at the Lord's return because no such penitential remembrances are called for in the heavenly life. "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom 5:10), after all.

The final perfection of our bodies, however, does not mean that Augustine ruled out all possibility for ongoing physical memorials of our temporal sufferings. For example, he thought the martyrs would retain evidence of their persecutions. "Nevertheless, such is our love for the martyrs that, even when we come into His kingdom, we shall want, so we feel, to see with our eyes the wounds which they bore in their bodies for the Name of Christ. And, maybe, we shall. For, in the martyrs, such wounds will not be a deformity; they will have a dignity and loveliness all their own; and, though this radiance will be spiritual and not physical, it will, in some way, beam from their bodies."[58] The indicators of past trauma, then, do not have to be erased if their meaning has been completely changed.

In the century before Augustine, the scars of the martyrs were honored at the Council of Nicaea. There were 318 bishops present at the council, many of whom had been tortured for Christ before Constantine's conversion. Theodoret of Cyrus wrote, "Many, like the holy apostles, bore in their bodies the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ." One bishop had had his hands crippled by hot irons. Another was missing his right arm. And some had had their eyes gouged out. "In short," Theodoret tells

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proceed to subvert conventional antidisability readings of the Bible by reading beneath and between its lines." Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2007), 42. "It cannot be denied that the biblical record and Christian theology have often been dangerous for persons with disabilities." Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 82.

[57] "As for ugly excrescences—which have the purpose of reminding us of the penal condition of mortal life—they will be so integrated into the substance as a whole that no deformity will appear in any one part." Augustine, *The City of God, Books XVII–XXII*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan, vol. 24 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1954), 468.

[58] He goes on to say, "But if it is becoming, in the world to come, that traces of glorious wounds should be left in immortal flesh, then where the wounds were made by crushing or cutting there the scars will remain, although, of course, the members themselves will be restored. What remains true is that in heaven there will be no defect left in any risen body. Who, however, would think of calling the traces of triumphant virtue a defect?" Augustine, *City of God, Books XVII–XXII*, 470.

us, "the Council looked like an assembled army of martyrs."[59] We are told that Emperor Constantine, who had called the council to settle the Arian question, was moved to place his lips upon the empty socket of one of the bishops out of honor and with hopes of receiving a blessing, as if this site of suffering had become a means of grace.[60] This accords with the notion that, as Augustine would write, the wounds of the martyrs and confessors are golden trophies of victory instead of shameful and debilitating atrocities.

Easter, His and Ours

Theological discussion of our resurrected bodies must commence from the one human body that has already been resurrected. Though mysteriously different, the body of Jesus that rose on Easter has clear continuity with the body that was removed from the cross. What is interesting for our study is that the glorified body of Jesus remains a wounded one.

Many contemporary disability theologians argue that disabling characteristics will be carried with us into the eschaton, at least in some sense. For them, the resurrected body of Jesus is seen as paradigmatic in that the injuries of his crucifixion were not expunged. The prints of nails and spear had even become markers for Jesus to identify himself to his disciples in Luke 24 and John 20. Christ's wounds permitted Thomas to know him as his Lord and God. The bodily evidence of Christ's manner of death does not diminish him in any way, however. His wounds are not ongoing sources of pain or trauma. Instead, they have become trophies of the atonement. They are the badges of his priestly office. His body is itself an evangelistic sermon, an incarnate missional Word.

Thus, it makes sense that the scars of Jesus would make an appearance in our hymnody and devotional literature, including our own *Lutheran Service Book*. For example, see Charles Wesley's Advent hymn about the return of Christ, "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending":

> Those dear tokens of His passion
> Still His dazzling body bears
> Cause of endless exultation
> To His ransomed worshipers.

[59] Theodoret of Cyrus, "The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret," trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, Etc.*, vol. 3 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), 43.

[60] Theodoret, "Ecclesiastical History," 48.

> With what rapture. . . .
> Gaze we on those glorious scars![61]

And they are not just scars in Christian reflection but wounds. See the hymn "Crown Him with Many Crowns":

> Crown Him the Lord of love. / Behold His hands and side,
> Rich wounds, yet visible above, / In beauty glorified.
> No angels in the sky / Can fully bear that sight,
> But downward bend their wond'ring eyes / At mysteries so bright.[62]

What glorified beauties can the angels not bear to see? The rich visible wounds of the Lord. With what rapture, indeed.

The resurrection of the disfigured Christ, incarnate Son, was a historical event in the sense that it occurred in space and time. But it is not simple past. It is present perfect, a past event with present consequences. What God did for Jesus at Easter, he is doing now in us by our Baptism into the crucified and risen Lord. Then, at our own personal Easter, when we step out of Sheol ourselves, our bodies will no longer be the sites of pain or shame, however they appear. We will know only full, unhindered integration of our whole person with Christ and his body forever.

It might not be theologically outlandish, then, to nondogmatically suppose that the saints retain markers in their transfigured flesh, in some sense, of their temporal hardships. Perhaps in the consummation of the new creation, we will not forget our earthly traumas outright. Maybe instead, those evil memories will be changed into our personal accounts of having faced the enemy and won. Consider the embarrassing relative who finds glee in showing his triple bypass scars to the kids at Thanksgiving or the World War II veteran who keeps the piece of shrapnel that shattered his leg. These men walked through the valley of the shadow of death and have lived to tell the tale. Maybe we will gaze on *our* glorious scars as well, our pain united with the pain of Jesus and transformed with it in our solidarity with the Son of God.

The disability itself is not fundamental to a person's identity, but the concrete victory of Jesus Christ over it now is. There will be many surprises in the hour of Christ's return. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Worldly appraisals of strength and rectitude will be tossed on their head. This promise is colorfully described in O'Connor's story titled "Revelation." The protagonist, Ruby Turpin, is obsessed with social propriety. Her world is shaken when a vile young woman

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[61] Charles Wesley, "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending," in *Lutheran Service Book*, ed. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 336, st. 3.

[62] Matthew Bridges, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," in The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Lutheran Service Book*, 525, st. 3.

named Mary Grace (of course she is) throws a book in her face and tries to strangle her. Still in shock after the encounter with the madwoman, Mrs. Turpin sees a vision of the Last Day in which there was "a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire." The bridge was filled with a sundry of saints "rumbling toward heaven," which included "whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives," followed by "battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs." It irritated Mrs. Turpin to see that the respectable Christians like her and her husband were last in line and having even their "virtues burned away."[63] On that day, God will have changed our mourning into dancing. He will have removed our sackcloth and clothed us with gladness (Ps 30:11).

V. Conclusion: Tying Things Together

We have seen how the physical infirmities generally known to humankind have been viewed in the history of Christian thought, including the devotion of Flannery O'Connor. The clear consensus has been that they are disruptions of our nature, not intrinsic to who we are, but that they can nevertheless be quite instructive. Disabilities are not constitutive of our identities, as some argue.[64] One might experience blindness, but it is not part of one's created nature to lack sight. Bartimaeus was a blind man until he was no longer a blind man, but he was always a man. Disability is accidental in the Aristotelian sense.

Nor should we think of illness and injury merely as signs of God's displeasure over sin. Our difficulties of body and mind serve to remind us of something that was already true of us before the fall: that we are finite in the presence of infinity; that we are dependent, not independent; and that there are limits to what we can become, even when we set our minds to it and work hard in school. The limitations of human embodiment, even our disabilities, are not necessarily a curse but are welcome gateways to reality. They open us to an accurate understanding of human nature in relationship to the Almighty—that is, that we are utterly dependent upon him in all things. The reason that human beings continually falter in this life is because we crave mastery. But that is a road to nowhere. There are no self-made men.

For Flannery O'Connor, her own life, suffering, and death make sense only in the light of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. She wrote, "For me, it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I

[63] Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 654.

[64] "But, as I have argued from the beginning of this book, a disability perspective would insist that some impairments are so identity-constitutive that their removal would involve the obliteration of the person as well." Yong, *Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 120.

am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. . . . [W]e . . . look forward to a resurrection of the body, which will be flesh and spirit united in peace, in the way they were in Christ. The resurrection of Christ seems the high point in the law of nature."[65] The body is as central to Flannery O'Connor's fiction as it is to her faith. There is no gnostic flight from creation in her stories. In fact, she knew, as one church father said, that the flesh is the very hinge of salvation.[66] And in our case, that flesh is broken beyond our own ability to repair.

Because of her focus on materiality, Flannery O'Connor's soteriology was thoroughly sacramental. Ordinarily a wallflower at dinner parties, she spoke her mind when the topic of the Eucharist came up. One socialite opined that she did not go in for the hocus-pocus of body and blood. She said it is a symbol, though a good one, to which O'Connor tartly replied, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." She added in a letter relating the event that the Holy Sacrament is "the center of existence for [her] and that all the rest of life is expendable."[67]

Faith comes by hearing, but it also comes by touching. Writing about the raising of the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7, Cyril of Alexandria asked why Jesus touched the funeral bier. Was not his word enough to raise the young man? Cyril answers his own question:

> It was, my beloved, that you might learn that the holy body of Christ is productive for the salvation of man. The flesh of the almighty Word is the body of life and was clothed with his might. Consider that iron when brought into contact with fire produces the effects of fire and fulfills its functions. The flesh of Christ also has the power to give life and annihilate the influence of death and corruption because it is the flesh of the Word, who gives life. May our Lord Jesus Christ also touch us that delivering us from evil works, even from fleshly lusts, he may unite us to the assemblies of the saints.[68]

Christ's very flesh and blood is life-giving, and he gives them to us to eat and drink. We are incorporated into the body of Christ by the body of Christ. And he will raise us up on the Last Day. This is no gossamer gospel. The incarnation of the Son of God, his tears and bloody sweat, his bodily resurrection, and his glorious ascension are redemptive in ways we can see, touch, taste, and smell.

To O'Connor, the cloying Christianity of her time (the 1950s and early 1960s) was just as antichrist as materialistic scientism, if in a different way. She wanted, by her stories, to drive us away from mass-marketed religious mush, the bland leading

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[65] O'Connor to A., September 6, 1955, in Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 953.

[66] Tertullian, "On the Resurrection of the Flesh," trans. Peter Holmes, in *ANF* 3:551.

[67] O'Connor to A., December 16, 1955, in Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 977.

[68] *Commentary on Luke, Homily 36*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament*, vol. 3, *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 118.

the bland, the gospel of niceness, to the incarnational saving realism of blood and cross and birth. She believed that only a jolt to our sensibilities can do that. Accustomed as many are to Pollyannaish expressions of Christianity, they mistake them for the true faith, just as over time, our tastebuds confuse saccharine for the real thing. So, she shouted at us and drew "large and startling figures" to show us that human mastery is a mirage.

O'Connor's diagnosis of American society was that it was crippled by misplaced optimism. The Horatio Alger effect was still going strong in the mid-twentieth century. These were the heydays of Norman Vincent Peale (*Power of Positive Thinking*) and Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*). She believed that her niche, or even her vocation, as a fiction writer was to puncture the crippling optimism and pop the balloon of toxic positivity. Her work administers bitter medicine.

Flannery O'Connor embraced the scandal of the cross. She was a fool for Christ. She was in love with the stone that makes men stumble and the rock that makes them fall (1 Pet 2:8). She knew that the great reversal Jesus brings, to which she alludes so often in her writing, would be a source of confusion and embarrassment. As O'Connor is reputed to have said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd."[69]

The prophetess from Andalusia wanted to flip the script. She believed that sickness is a school for our growth. She wrote, "Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies."[70] Using a phrase she picked up from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Flannery O'Connor learned to accept that her life was a series of "*passive diminishments*."[71] Facing sickness and death, facing the stark raving reality of our mortality—these are the things that give us the most spiritual clarity. As Dean Wenthe has been known to say, "Hardship improves your prayer life."

O'Connor wrote, "To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility."[72] Here again, limitation is the gateway to reality. It is proof that God loves us. Before Eve and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, they did not need illness or injury to remind them of what they had not yet forgotten. Their utter reliance upon divine life was joy. They were happy to be branches on the Vine. However, sinful humanity now has been captured by the mass hallucination of self-determination, plunged into a looking-glass world where progress is really regress. Pain is God's megaphone, as C. S. Lewis described it, to get our attention and call us

[69] Though often repeated, no definitive source for this quote has been found.
[70] O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, 163.
[71] O'Connor, introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, 223.
[72] O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," 35.

back to a spirit of receptivity.[73] In that sense, the limitations imposed by suffering can be good for us and can even be received with thanksgiving.

Consider the example of the annoying grandmother who faces the misfit's gun barrel in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." After murdering her, the killer says, "She would of been a good woman . . . if [there] had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."[74] While that is crudely put, the idea here is that facing the certainty of your mortality—as Flannery herself had to do daily—sharpens your focus, helps you to relinquish the glib nonsense, to overcome sentimental Christianity, and to focus on your telos in Christ. Awareness of your own personal eschatology leads to the good life. Illness, injury, madness, and decrepitude might just be the spiritual tonic we need the most.

[73] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 88.
[74] Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in Fitzgerald, *Collected Works*, 153.