

Grandmother's communion: Lessons on the one true church

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My paternal grandmother, blessed be her memory, lived at the north end of our little village, in a neighborhood called Tiny Town for the minuscule cabins and cottages there, arranged in concentric circles. The neighborhood, once the site of a midden of clam and oyster shells left by the first people in the area, had then been for many years a summer campground for religious revivalists from the city, who initially erected tents during their summer revels, and then built tiny cabins and cottages; the revivalists in their turn gave way to settlers, who updated their elvish housing but did not, for various reasons, expand or enlarge them, a habit that persisted deep into the last century.

These revivalists had been Methodists, a fact that delighted my grandmother no end, for you never met a woman with a sharper and more amused tongue about other religions than our own, which would be, of course, the One True Church, Holy and Roman, the Church Eternal, Our Mother the Church, built on the rocky shoulders of St. Peter, watched over by His Holiness the Pontiff, steward of the bridge between God and man. The pope was always Italian, explained my grandmother, because St. Augustine said we should do as the Romans do. I pondered this remark for a while in silence and then confessed to grandmother that I had no idea what she meant by that. She said she didn't either, which was yet another one of the sacred mysteries.

Your Methodists, said my grandmother, pursue a method, but not one of the poor creatures can explain what that means, which tells you all you need to know about the Methodists. The same thing is true with Presbyterians; bless their souls, when you ask them what is a presbyter they stammer and mumble in the most abashed fashion, and then return to making shoes or chipping tombstones or whatever it is they do. Similarly your Episcopalians, who could not identify episcopality if you gave them money and whiskey, and your Congregationalists, whose religion is named for the way people sit in rows. You might as well name yourselves the Gatheralists or the Pew People. And then consider the Lutherans, who are named for a Catholic monk, and the Baptists, who are named for taking baths, and the Calvinists, who are named, God help us all, for a Frenchman. At least the Jews are named for a place they came from, and of course Our Lord Jesus Christ started out Jewish, until the wedding at Cana, where by the virtue of his first public miracle he created the True Faith. He may have done miracles before that time, but of those performed privately we know not. Of the Christian traditions only Catholicism, the One True Faith, is properly named, as you see, because *catholic* means for everybody, which it is.

This was how my grandmother talked, tiny and adamant in her tiny kitchen, and my brothers and I would crowd around the table, eating her cinnamon cookies and peach pies and redolent macaroons and learning a great deal about Catholicism we had not learned at home, where our parents spoke of saints like Floyd Patterson, who was a Knight of Columbus when he wasn't engaged in unseemly but eminently remunerative fisticuffs, as our dad said. That is still how our dad talks, in a cheerfully opulent way, spiced with brief but memorable lectures on such things as Fulton Sheen's florid use of capes and cloaks, the good old days when the Catholic Church owned most of the best vineyards in the world, and why the Crusades were mere brutal terrorist expeditions, not at all admirable religious adventures to reclaim holy land, as if possessiveness was holy in the least, the greed for possession being the root of all evils, as we have many times discussed, haven't we, boys?

One of my younger brothers once asked our grandmother about other forms of Catholicism (we had just learned about Chaldean and Ethiopian Catholic churches in school), and she hooted and said those poor fledglings will soon be back in full communion with the Church Eternal. They were not unlike adolescents who explore out to the far limits of good sense and behavior and then slowly return to intelligent existence as they fitfully mature, like some boys I know will not, I hope, do, but I pray they mature apace, making the smallest of mistakes and committing only the

most venial of sins, and yes, Brian, I am looking at you.

Another time we ventured to ask our grandmother about all the other religious traditions other than the ones we would call Christian, for example, Islam and Buddhism, and this time she surprised us, for she was wonderfully respectful, in her way. I have the greatest respect for other traditions, she said, if they are anywhere near sane and do not advocate or condone the worship of bundles of sticks or golden calves or clay figurines or whatnot. You have to admire the religious impulse, which is an inherent and natural thing in us and takes endlessly curious forms, until it arrives finally at the Church Eternal. To disrespect or denigrate such other religions would be like denigrating children for not being adults yet. It would offend nature. Also they tend to wear bright clothing, which is pleasant. You will notice, boys, that the Church Eternal has settled on black and white as our general issue colors, with red and green for special occasions, purple to indicate rank and authority, and blue reserved for the Mother of us all. To be honest, there are times when I wish we would throw in a little brilliant orange or shocking yellow here and there, just for the summery lift and laugh of it, but one great thing about the Church Eternal is the sure knowledge that whatever it is we do, we do for the best and right reason, whether we understand it or not. So the lesson would be that even I do not yet grasp why we have shelved some colors but celebrate others. But there's always room to learn, boys. There's always room to learn.

Our grandmother died suddenly before any of us muddled into adolescence, and as one of my brothers recently observed, maybe this was for the best, as our grandmother did not have to witness our tumultuous teenage years, which entailed sprinting headlong away from the Church Eternal, among other venial sins, before we shuffled and shambled back to the faith later, abashed and wiser. Our dad oversaw the sale of her tiny cabin in Tiny Town to the grandson of one of the original summer revivalist preachers, and my brothers and I well remember the day we came to clear our grandmother's few possessions from the cabin before it changed hands. Everything she owned fit into three boxes. Most of what she owned was in her kitchen, and it seemed to us that almost all of her kitchenware was designed to make and hold food for us; as our dad said gently on the way home, *communion* and *Eucharist* are much larger words than we think they are, boys. But the box that all of us brothers remember with amazement even now was the third one, packed with what we found in a tiny closet in her bedroom—an array of blouses and skirts and scarves and sweaters of the most brilliant, glorious, wonderful oranges and yellows we had ever seen, some of them so bright you had to shield your eyes.