



ELIZABETH O'CONNOR

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Introduction

Who is Elizabeth O'Connor? How do you describe her? Is it possible to capture the essence and ethos of a person whom you have never met? Fortunately she was a prolific writer, and a remarkably vulnerable one at that. She has left us a legacy in her words, but even more so in her spirit. She was a writer, which is certain. But she was also so much more; a guide, a fellow traveler, an observer, a participant. She epitomized Henri Nouwen's "Wounded Healer".

Elizabeth O'Connor has intrigued me for the last several years. She seems to be one of those authors whose ideas hang around in the cobwebs of your mind. Her words carry meaning and ministry beyond what I am able to grasp in a solitary reading. Her messages are rich and full of spiritual protein, they take time to chew and digest. I was first introduced to O'Connor's writing through a Servant Leadership training that I participated in while serving a church in Ohio. This curriculum was modeled after the Church of the Saviour School of Servant Leadership, which O'Connor was instrumental in creating. During ten months, from September to June, in 1999-2000, I participated in a small group that explored the dimensions of call, gifts, being with the poor, and other similar themes. During this course we read O'Connor's *Eighth Day of Creation: Discovering your gifts* and *Cry Pain, Cry Hope: A Guide to the Dimensions of Call*. In this brief paper I will explore some of the common themes in O'Connor's writing and life, specifically how she integrated spirituality and mission and the disciplines she practiced. In conclusion, I will reflect on how I am being, and have been, formed by the Spirit through O'Connor's teaching.

Her Story: A brief biography

It is impossible to tell her story without telling the story of the Church of the Saviour. The two are inexorably entwined. Further, it is important to have a sense of her personal history in order to understand something of her teaching as well. Elizabeth O'Connor came to Washington, D.C. when she was thirty-one years old. She had originally planned on a temporary stay while she looked for a "healing environment for her mentally ill brother" (Menehan 1989:17). But a visit to The Church of The Saviour, a newly established congregation under the leadership of Gordon Cosby, changed her plans. She had been invited by two friends to a class Cosby was teaching at the church. She writes, "I was fond of these friends and in the debt of their love, so out of respect for what was important to them I went to visit the church that they were excited about and described as 'different'" (1991:preface). Dorothy Devers, a long-time friend of O'Connor's and an editor of her work, was also a member of The Church of The Saviour. She shared a tribute to O'Connor at her memorial service saying, "She had come to please her friends but, before the evening had ended, she knew that she had come home.... I recall how shy she was, so inhibited that she had not the courage to read aloud even one verse of Scripture" (2003).

Elizabeth O'Connor died on October 17, 1998. She has left an indelible mark upon her community, The Church of The Saviour, and the many that have read her books and articles. Gordon Cosby pays homage to her in a sermon the day after her death. He states, "For Elizabeth, everything was geared to personal growth leading to outward work, all in the context of faith communities. Her books were deeply supportive of our missions, interpreting them for a larger public" (1999:14). Cosby continues, "Elizabeth felt that every local congregation should be a seminary preparing its people for ministry, and she felt that one of the deepest challenges was that of teaching" (Ibid 1999:14). According to Cosby, "Elizabeth thought of herself primarily as an educator", and her writing was an expression of this call. "She didn't think of it as just a call to write, but a

call to interpret church and its meaning in terms that the uninitiated into the faith could understand. Many who have been alienated from the church began their journey home through her writings” (Ibid 1999:14). In an interview with Kelsey Menehan, O’Connor reveals, “I write for those who are lonely in their hearts, people searching for what they have not found” (1989:17).

Key themes in her life and work

Through her writing she would not only tell the story of The Church of The Saviour, but would also explore related themes such as gifts, call, and community. We will look at each of these in turn.

Gifts

The *Eighth Day of Creation*, a book by O’Connor, was written:

To give guidance to the church’s mission groups working in such varying areas as programs for the aged, housing for the poor, life-giving structures for neglected and abandoned children, polycultural education, leadership training for ghetto youth, and a coffee house ministry in the inner city (1971:5).

This guidance revolves around the concept of giftedness. She describes her church as one that is a “gift-evoking, gift-bearing community” (Ibid 1971:6). For O’Connor, the exercising of one’s gifts is a divine creative process. The calling forth of persons’ gifts is not an exercise in egotism or holy individualism for The Church of The Saviour. The sounding of one’s gifts is intimately connected with call and integral in a community’s common mission. The church structures itself in the form of many small mission groups. These groups are organized around a specific call or ministry or mission. The call is set before the congregation and if it “comes as good news to others” (Ibid 1971:24) then the group will form. When a group has formed, “one of its first tasks is to identify the gifts of each of its members so that every person is exercising a gift on behalf of the group”

(Ibid 1971:24). As we exercise our own gifts we call forth giftedness in others. Call, then, goes hand in hand with our gifts.

Call

In reflecting upon call, O'Connor writes,

I feel as though I am contemplating a mystery. Time was when I thought that the all-important subject was gifts, and that, if only we could identify our gifts, and begin using them, our lives would burst with creativity and the world would be restored. Now I am not so sure.... Call determines whether and how [one uses] their gifts (1987:79).

Call is essential of O'Connor. She believes that everyone has a call, a "good work" to do in their life. Not only does this good work accomplish something helpful for the world, but it "completes something in us" (Ibid 1987:14). The work we do in the world has work to do in us. Again, call is not isolated. It obviously has much to do with gifting, but it is equally connected with community. Institutions also have a call, "like people [they] journey by stages. They, too, must die to the old in order to be born to the new" (Ibid 1987:16).

The Church of The Saviour typifies this dynamic. In 1975 the church was twenty-eight years old; it had grown to 110 members and 40 intern members. Gordon Cosby spoke to the church council in that year, "I am sensing an inability to be faithful to my call and also faithful to the structures that we now have" (O'Connor 1976:34). The church then began a period of discernment, of which O'Connor was a part. The result was the creation of six new churches, or "faith communities". O'Connor writes, "In the congregation our members began to sound calls for the formations of new sister communities.... Everyone listened attentively to hear if in these calls they were being addressed by an inner Voice" (1976:36). As for Elizabeth, she and nine adults and four children purchased a six-unit apartment building in the inner city. The new, small church became known as the Eighth Day Community. They turned the basement into an "inner

city retreat room” and they sought to create education programs for both sister communities and other churches who were working in these social justice arenas (Ibid 1976:36).

Community

In 1976 O’Connor wrote *The New Community*, she begins her introduction stating that, “through all my books runs the theme of Christian community. I think that there will be no end to my writing of it” (1976:1). And indeed, there has not been. It was present in every book up that point and is present in all the ones afterwards as well. O’Connor writes of community, specifically Christian community as one who lived it. She does not write a romanticized version, extolling the glories of community. She does write plainly, yet beautifully. Community is hard work and O’Connor makes no apologies that it is. “Engagement with others in depth is always difficult within the church, which is probably why so few try it and why there is so little genuine Christian community in the world” (1968:24). She continues in the introduction of *The New Community*,

This book is for those who have some understanding that genuine community is the highest achievement of humankind, demands more of us than any other endeavor and is supremely worth the struggle. I have written it out of my own yearnings and search; out of my failings and small victories; in the midst of loneliness and in the midst of community – of alienation and communion (1976:1).

This captures her heart regarding this pervasive theme in O’Connor’s life and work. She is supremely aware of her brokenness and her belovedness at the same time.

Disciplines

In addition to these themes, of gifts, call, and community, one is prompted to question how Elizabeth O’Connor practiced her faith and what her disciplines were. The

use of the term “disciplines” is intentional, as this is what O’Connor and The Church of The Saviour use as well. O’Connor comments in her interview with Kelsey Menehan, “To think we Christians can grow in faith and grow into the full stature of Christ without disciplines is a kind of folly” (1989:18). As a member of The Church of The Saviour,

O’Connor would yearly agree to practice specific disciplines in her life. They include:

- Meet with God daily in a set time of prayer.
- Let God confront us daily through the Scriptures.
- Worship weekly – normally with our church.
- Grow in love for the brotherhood and all people, remembering the command, “Love one another as I have loved you.”
- Be a vital contributing member of one of the [mission] groups.
- Give proportionally, beginning at a tithe of our incomes.
- Confess and ask the help of our fellowship should we fail in these expressions of our devotion (Cosby n.d.:37).

Disciplines are of vital importance to O’Connor and The Church of The Saviour. And yet they are not view as legalistic standards. O’Connor explores this territory in *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. In it she writes, “The person on an inward journey in the church come-of-age will be familiar with all forms of prayer.... He will take time to experience a life that is different from his life, and to see a world that is not visible to the ordinary glance” (1968:19). Obviously this understanding of prayer is far from formulaic or mechanistic. Prayer, and all the disciplines, for O’Connor are a necessity for authentic Christian living and a profound embrace of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Elizabeth O’Connor lived a profound life that was strikingly ordinary, yet divinely sublime. She witnessed to the life-giving power of the Spirit, not in a mountain retreat, but on the hard, cold streets of inner city Washington, D.C. There is little available about O’Connor before she joined The Church of The Saviour. However, her life and work from the time she joined the church in 1952 until her death in

1998 speaks volumes of how God formed both this unique community and herself. Through her writing and teaching she has impacted many others beyond the church.

I am grateful that I have been privileged to be one of the many whom she has touched. Her writings enabled me to see how the inner, spiritual life and outward, missional life connect and flow. Through the Servant Leadership curriculum, her books, and the testimony of her life, it is evident that the inward journey and outward journey are inexorably united. I have always appreciated the rhythm of the Servant Leadership curriculum. It moves like an hourglass beginning with who we are as God's beloved and cascading increasingly inward to the point of identifying our pain and our call. From this internal, vulnerable point we moved back outward, but not to ourselves. Rather, we moved from hearing our pain and our call to an active engagement in the world. This pattern helps reinforce the fact that our spiritual and missional lives are not a dichotomy, but a whole. They ebb and flow together, one informing the other. May this be so in my life as it was in Elizabeth O'Connor's!

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