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Author(s): Mark Bosco

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GRAHAM GREENE'S CATHOLIC IMAGINATION

Mark Bosco, SJ

Graham Greene: Catholic or Post-Catholic?

In a book-length interview with Marie-Françoise Allain late in Graham Greene's life, Greene described the imaginative role Catholicism played in his long writing career by alluding to his literary hero Henry James: "There does exist a pattern in my carpet constituted by Catholicism, but one has to stand back in order to make it out" (Allain 159). It is a fitting metaphor for the manner in which Catholicism's difference is often inscribed in many of Greene's characters, plots and theme. If Catholicism in not the very fabric of many of his texts, it is always a thread that helps to bind his literary preoccupations into a recognizable pattern.

With the success of Brighton Rock (1939), Graham Greene entered into his most productive years of writing, producing a series of novels that explored the boundaries and loyalties of religious faith as understood in the dimensions of the Catholic consciousness of his characters. In this same period critics began calling Greene a "Catholic novelist," a label that inadvertently worked to mark the restrictions of his talent. Reviewers of his earlier eight novels were amused by this supposed religious turn in a novelist who had heretofore shown mastery for melodrama and the psychological thriller in such works as The Man Within (1929) and Stanboul Train (1932). The themes in Greene's early novels, beset with criminals and conspirators, alienated protagonists and their betrayal of loyalties,
actually find expression in all his great novels of this middle period: the Catholic Pinkie in *Brighton Rock*, who conspires to marry Rose in the fallout of a gang murder; the whiskey prist in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), who betrays his celibate vows by fathering a child; the convert Scobie in *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), whose double loyalties to wife and mistress cause his suicide; and the adultery of Bendrix in *The End of the Affair* (1951) who plays a game of loyalty and betrayal between his mistress, her husband, and her God. In each instance, Greene’s use of Catholicism extends the psychological and moral crisis of characters beyond their own deception and treachery, and places it in confrontation with God. Indeed, Greene illustrates that one’s faith and belief in God is as treacherous a place as the world of politics and espionage.

Because of this intense confrontation with religious interiority, early critics with a religious disposition had shown a reticence in accepting the paradoxical way Greene’s Catholic imagination inverts and even subverts the formulas and doctrines of his faith. Many accused him of heresy in Manichean and Jansenist varieties. The space between the fallen nature of Greene’s characters and the mysterious, inscrutable grace of God was too wide a theological gap to be countenanced, and Greene’s disdain for traditional expressions of Catholic faith and piety portrayed throughout his novels proved troubling to many in the pre-Vatican II discourses of the Catholic Church. Indeed, Greene’s most famous novel, *The Power and the Glory*, was for a time on the Church’s Index of Forbidden Books. Critics implicitly questioned the veracity of Greene’s Catholicism because of the way he transgressed the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. As Roger Sharrock notes, Greene the convert was continually compared at this time with Catholic novelist François Mauriac, who “with the faith in his bones and a known, convincing regional background, was able to escape heresy. But did Greene’s [faith] really exist or was it not the product of a personal trauma?” (Sharrock 14).

Other critics who show a secularist prejudice have claimed that Greene’s Catholic novels show little originality and rely on religious dogmas as a device merely to heighten the melodramatic effects of his stories into a contrived seriousness. The religious struggles are viewed as false in terms of contemporary expressions of the psychological novel. If Catholic critics were hesitant to accept Greene’s Catholic imagination during this most “Catholic” period of his career, secular critics took Greene to task for obscuring his humanism with religious tensions. Indeed, since Greene’s later novels eschewed the interiorized theological consciousness of his earlier Catholic characters, commentators have been quick to divide his
work into a Catholic and a post-Catholic period, with political and postcolonial concerns as the moral barometer of his later novels.

Robert Pendleton for instance, argues that Greene's Catholic novels were but a psychological and stylistic detour from his "Conradian masterplot," a perhaps unconscious attempt by Greene to create a genre that set him apart from the overt homage his thrillers owed to Conrad's narrative themes and protagonists. Pendleton suggests that Greene's novels operate as "deviations" and "misplaced repetitions" of Conrad's interiorized thrillers (Pendleton 5). And Cates Baldridge, in an otherwise nuanced discussion of the conception of God in Greene's novels, concludes that Greene created his own idiosyncratic and powerful religious system that, seen over the accumulation of his novels, divested itself of any orthodox form of Catholicism, so that "his novels of the fifties and beyond are in an undeniable sense 'post-Catholic' novels and even 'post-Christian'" (Baldridge 129). Baldridge argues that Greene's deity is imagined as one in the midst of cosmic entropy, a God who never triumphs in the world, much less in the human person.²

What is striking about both Pendleton and Baldridge's argument is how it returns to the Protestant English interdisciplinary tradition—the heritage of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Matthew Arnold—that stresses in literature the absence of God, or at least God's virtual impotence and demise in the modern world of Enlightenment rationalism, science and philosophical idealism. Also missing in much of the discussion that marks Greene's novels into religious and secular categories is any appreciation by such critics of the theological centrality of Catholic mediation, specifically in the person of Christ and in the sacramental vision of Catholicism. And rarely, if ever, does the literary criticism question the relevance of developments in Roman Catholicism that resulted from the Second Vatican Council on Greene's artistic imagination. Indeed, the evidence to do so comes in countless interviews and essays in which Greene continues to engage the social teaching of Catholicism and post-Vatican II theological texts, as well as in the subject and theme of most of the novels written in the last decades of his life.³

A post-Vatican II Catholic Imagination?

Catholic theology before Vatican II was often a hermetic, scholastic endeavor that stressed the individual's status before God in terms of moral precepts and ritual obligations. The revival of Thomism in the early twentieth century began a conscious dialogue between the Church and the
philosophy and culture of modernity, arguing that the Church’s philosophical and theological synthesis had an important role to play in both social and political aspects of society. With the advent of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), a dramatic shift in theological emphasis affected the practice and attitudes toward Catholic belief in a number of important ways. The Council emphasized a theological “perspective from below,” a methodology which stressed God’s manifestation of grace on the horizontal plane of human relationships within and without the Church. The secular concerns of society, even the most profane of them, became possible ways to the sacred. This emphasis is noted in renewed Christological concerns that stressed the humanity of Christ as its starting point, and in the emphasis on communal justice over personal acts of charity in the Church’s social teaching.

Perhaps more profound was the reorientation of the sacramentality of Catholicism, so that sacraments are neither to be isolated in ritual actions stemming from an intermediating priest, nor confined to the functionalism inherent in the theological concept of ex opere operato—“by the work worked”—a claim that the sacraments bestow God’s grace in virtue of the performance of the sacramental action. The Council affirmed that God’s grace intervenes not only in the priest’s functions but in the diffusion of all the baptized members of the church community. All forms of human interaction with the world have the possibility of being sacraments, defined as a visible sign of God’s invisible reality.

The Council clearly rejected the body-and-soul dualism of human nature that was part of aspects of the legacy of Catholic thought. In an attempt at a more holistic understanding taking seriously the doctrine of the Incarnation, the body is not portrayed as at war with the soul; rather the body and the soul are consubstantial, sacred co-constituents of human life. The divine is found in the endeavors of the body, so that the spiritual life must be understood in part as the striving of the body, just as bodily desires must be understood as a possible path for the soul. This added theological emphasis on the human body grounded the Church’s post-Vatican II social teachings on the dignity of the human person, the sacramental nature of human work, and the call for justice to meet the physical as well as the spiritual needs of people.

Finally, there was a reorientation of the Church’s self-understanding and its relationship to the outside world. The documents of the Council continually stressed the “pilgrim” nature of the church as a “people of God,” implying that it was at the same time holy and sinful, needing to be constantly renewed. As to the situation of the world, the documents
recognized the need for a critical reading of the “signs of the times” in which the Church might more fully enter into the political and social struggles of peoples. It reinterpreted the teaching extra ecclesiam nulla salus—no salvation outside the Church—realizing that the Church as institution is not solely the Church of Christ, and so not the sole arbiter of salvation. Indeed, the Council makes explicit that non-Christian religions may also serve as instruments of salvation.4

It is true that after Greene’s publication of A Burnt-Out Case in 1961, Greene extricated himself from the stylistic intensity of his character’s Catholic interiority as the primary focus for formulating the crises in his novels. Whether a character’s actions contributed to his personal salvation or damnation was no longer the paramount issue; rather, Greene’s focus turned to human action deriving from political relationships that allegorized the human struggle in economic and moral terms. Most criticism has seen this as a “post-Catholic” maneuver on Greene’s part, a turn away from the imaginative world of Catholicism. Yet Greene’s artistic confrontation with his religious imagination parallels the developments in Catholic theology, doctrine and liturgy since Vatican II. When Greene returns to explicitly religious themes in his later novels, his Catholic imagination is engaged in a dialogue with both the political concerns as well as the religious crises of belief that have become part of the Catholic Church’s own experience since the end of the Council.

I am not suggesting that Greene was writing these novels with Catholic social teachings and doctrinal controversies in mind. In fact, Greene’s concern for the “human factor” is not necessarily always embodied in Catholicism. What I am suggesting is that to compartmentalize Greene’s work into a Catholic and post-Catholic period betrays the organic growth of his religious imagination and his literary artistry as he lived in tension with his religious faith in the last half of the twentieth century. The restrictive ingredients of the historical genre of the Catholic novel obfuscate a consideration of the way his Catholic imagination continues to frame his work. Greene’s ironic stance toward the use of theological categories in these later novels does not remove the issues of faith and belief from them, but transposes them into political and social concerns in which justice, salvation, even the mystery of divine grace, might be manifested. Where Catholicism was once monolithic in his earlier novels, it now becomes part of a dialogue with the contemporary situations of his texts. To this end, I want to look a little more closely at the shape of Greene’s Catholicism and then turn to two of his novels that show the continuity and the development of his Catholic imagination. I want to
suggest that comparing *The Power and the Glory* (1940) and *The Honorary Consul* (1973) illustrates how Greene's religious imagination had shifted his emphasis in the intervening thirty-five years that saw the greatest change in the Catholic Church in centuries.

*The Contours of Greene's Catholic Imagination: 1940 and 1973*

Greene's conversion to Catholicism did not happen in a vacuum, and the simple rejoinder that he converted to marry Vivien Dayrell-Browning belies the complex manner in which Catholicism engaged Greene's experience of life throughout his long literary career. The preoccupations of his religious imagination are illustrative of the problems and preoccupations which have formed the consciousness of much of the twentieth century, and his Catholic vision is always in dialogue with the cultural and political world in which he finds himself. It is important then to begin by charting certain of these characteristics of "Greeneland," the term often used to describe the existential and religious geography of Greene's novels.

All the most important things in a writer's life, Greene often declared in interviews, happened during the first sixteen years. It seems true of Greene, for his creativity was shaped by the literary heritage of the Victorian and Edwardian age that was a staple of his early reading. He greatly admired the novels of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, the adventure stories of Rider Haggard, the detective stories of G. K. Chesterton, and the many works of Robert Louis Stevenson, a family relation on his mother's side. In his *Collected Essays* (1970), Greene shows his appreciation of each of these writers in the formative years of his imagination. His love of the political thriller and the adventure story owes much to Conrad, and his focus on the interior tensions in the consciousness of his characters owes much to James. Further, Greene's early years were marked by his discomfort at school—the divided loyalty between his father the Headmaster and his schoolmates, the loss of privacy, the acts of betrayal, and the authoritarian strain of adolescence. All these contributed to his sense of the precariousness of his life and the world's injustices. Greene's religious imagination is so deeply grounded in these early experiences that they show up thematically in all of his most deeply felt work.

Though he often disparaged his youthful conversion to Catholicism as merely pragmatic, it was nevertheless an important act. This had the effect of positioning him in a religious, intellectual history that enabled him to critique the comfortable liberalism of his English Protestant roots at the
same time that it offered support for his creative turn to the religious interiority of his characters. In effect, Greene found in Catholicism a doctrinal and imaginative discourse that was compatible with his earliest experiences and gave him some critical objectivity in crafting the contours of his own creativity. Whether as a novelist, playwright, journalist, or essayist, Greene demonstrates that Catholicism gave him a point of view throughout his long career.

Like many British intellectuals who converted during this time, Greene found solace and support in his reading of John Henry Newman. In the epigraph to his travel book on Mexico, The Lawless Roads (1939), Greene quotes from Newman’s Apologia Pro Vita Sua:

The defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion … inflicts upon the mind the sense of the profound mystery which is absolutely beyond the human situation … if there be a God, since there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.

Greene’s debt to Newman cannot be underestimated. His insights are found throughout Greene’s narrative world, for like Newman, Greene accepts the existence of evil as a fact of life, as the “way of the world.” In Newman he found both a theological lens and a ground for support for his ambiguous profession of faith, noting in an interview, “As a writer, I have often been criticized by the pious. Newman answers them” (Cassis 287).

This “aboriginal calamity” is the world of “Greeneland,” a landscape filled with lonely, pathetic, and sometimes malevolent characters. Incidents of pursuit, acts of violence, and voluntary and involuntary betrayal populate a world set against a background of misery and squalor. Greene’s characters live as exiles or on the extreme edges of society, conscious of their failure and their betrayals of one another and, often, of their faith in God. Throughout his texts the eschatological certainties of both Christianity and Marxist ideology are always thwarted by the inevitability of failure. Greeneland is thus an uncomfortable place for both bourgeois religious piety Catholic and Protestant—as well as Marxist ideology, precisely because of the optimistic assumptions about human nature and the eschatological utopias that pervade both these positions. Indeed, Greene implies that only the hopeless causes that engage characters are worthy of allegiance, specifically because they are unlikely to succeed. Failure, as Terry Eagleton claims, is the one legitimate form of victory in Greene’s novels, suggesting that the doctrine of the Incarnation finds its textual embodiment not so much in human creativity, but in human failure—the tragic, radically fallen nature of humanity (Eagleton 114-15).
Though Eagleton overstates the situation, it is true that the primary religious insight that is sustained throughout Greene’s religious landscape is the Christian doctrine of the felix culpa, the happy effect of human sin as the cause of God’s grace manifested in the Incarnation to an individual or a community. The Incarnation is revealed to characters when they discover that their sins or their suffering bring them into an analogical relationship with the suffering God in Christ. Even in Greene’s least overtly religious novels, his protagonists experience such a manifestation or Joycean “epiphany.” His reluctant and often degraded heroes are ennobled by the way in which they come to understand and face their own failure and/or worthlessness before God or before those to whom they have committed themselves. There is always a dialectical strain in Greene’s religious imagination, then, a critical response to what Greene considered the major flaw of his Protestant heritage: the denial of this aboriginal calamity that compromises all of the noblest of human aspirations.

Greene’s religious imagination is also centered on the tension between belief and unbelief, mirroring through his novels the epistemological and existential dilemmas of his century. In this way he is in part a product of the Enlightenment and liberal establishment, privileging doubt as the premiere virtue of humanity, claiming that, “doubt like the conscience is inherent in human nature … perhaps they are the same thing” (Yours, Etc. 225). Orthodoxy, or “right belief,” is always open to doubt, because there is never only one perspective in which to understand truth, and it is inevitably open to mystery. Greene subversively puts this ostensibly secular virtue at the service of a Catholic sensibility. He often highlights the virtue of doubt in the concluding remarks of many of his novels, wherein a priest comments on the possibility of redemption for the hero/antihero.

This remark usually comes at the expense of complacent certitudes given by the institutional Church. In the final pages of The Heart of the Matter (1948), for example, Louise worries that Scobie’s suicide sends him to hell, to which Fr. Rank, the parish priest, answers, “The Church knows all the rules. But it doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart” (272). And in as late a novel as Monsignor Quixote (1982), the priest-hero has a disturbing dream in which he watches Christ get off the cross before his persecutors, making the whole world know with certainty that he is the Son of God. As the priest awakens he feels “the chill of despair felt by a man who realized suddenly that he has taken up a profession which is of use to no one … who must live without doubt or faith, where everyone is certain that the same belief is true” (70). So doubt becomes a two-edged sword for Greene’s characters: it can allow for the ineffable and mysterious
working of faith to be recognized and honored or it can lead to a rationalistic and ultimately skeptical stance toward human flourishing.

Greene claimed in a late interview that he understood faith and belief as two different realms: “What I distinguish is between faith and belief. One may have less belief as one grows older but one’s faith can say, ‘Yes, but you are wrong.’ Belief is rational, faith is irrational and one can still continue to have an irrational faith when one’s belief weakens” (Cassis 334.) Greene locates faith in acceptance of God and a trust in God’s love and mercy, where belief is found in human rationalization and institutionalization of God through theology and the Church. Doubt, whether in political or religious systems, is at the heart of the human enterprise because it checks any overt triumph of ideological excess. It suggests Greene’s affinity to the dialectical power of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” where trembling self-doubt, placed in extreme situations on the precipice of despair, is honored above any religious Pharisaism or political party line, even if it means relinquishing the power or the comfort that comes from such institutionalized structures.

In this light, arguing that Greene has a discernible Catholic imagination cannot mean that Catholic difference is always in reference to the Protestant intellectual and religious heritage from which he came, that his conversion to Catholicism and his imaginative use of it is a rejection of his English cultural heritage. Rather, Greene’s religious imagination finds in Catholicism a perspective, a place to stand, and in doing so, a place to reflect and critique the world, including the world of Catholicism. To use the theologian David Tracy’s understanding of analogical and dialectical religious language, we might say that Greene, as a convert imbued with a modern, Protestant, liberal ethos, has a well-developed dialectical imagination constantly challenging the more precisely analogical tendencies of his professed Catholic faith. If, according to Tracy, the analogical imagination is prone to an easy accommodation of differences in its desire for synthesis, order and harmony, the dialectical imagination becomes a prophetic discourse that focuses on human uncertainty, negates formulaic claims on the nature of faith and God, and emphasizes the self-destructive forces at work in the human heart. Greene’s texts constantly criticize the self-satisfied religious pietism he found in either Catholicism or liberal Protestantism, and excoriates the excessively institutional side of Catholicism for its certainty, its triumphalism, and its tendency to compromise with the political powers and principalities of this world.

Greene embodies, then, what the theologian Paul Tillich calls the “protestant principle,” the “protest against the tragic-demonic self-eleva-
tion of religion that liberates religion from itself for the other functions of the human spirit” (Tillich 245). Indeed, in a book-length interview Greene claims, “I fear that I’m a Protestant in the bosom of the Church” (Allain 168). Greene’s texts constantly enact this tension between the dialectical and analogical language of religious faith, which influences many critics to argue that Greene’s conversion never carried the full engagement of his heart or head. As one who disagrees with that assessment, I find that the transgressive play upon Catholicism in Greene’s literary landscape—in terms of Catholic orthodoxy and the Church’s claim to certitude—never really denies the significance of his Catholic vision. Rather, this critique and transgression is purifying and deconstructive, a task of the dialectical tendencies of his own complex religious imagination.

Significantly, the Catholic Church performed its own purification and renewal through the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council and in the years following. The focus and thrust of Catholicism took on new paradigms to articulate its role in the world, showing an evolution, or in Newman’s phrase, a “development” away from the Church’s dialectical stand against the Reformation and the concomitant antagonism to Enlightenment thought in western civilization to a more analogical stand toward political and religious communities outside Catholicism. Greene inhabits this borderland too, a space in which his Catholic imagination evolved as his experience and study of Catholicism evolved throughout his life. Two novels may help to compare the evolving expression of Greene’s Catholic imagination, especially through the differing ways that the theology of Christ structures or ironizes the themes in the novel; the ways in which priesthood and the sacraments are understood in the texts; and the relationship of political ideology to religious faith.

*The Power and the Glory*: 1940

Greene’s most famous novel re-enacts an archetypal story of pursuit and betrayal, specifically drawn in Catholic terms by making the chase motif operate on two levels. The first is the fugitive priest attempting to escape from the pursuing forces of a political state in which Catholicism is treasonable and priesthood is punishable by death, the second the discovery that the priest is even more intensely pursued by the power of God’s grace. From the opening scene when the nameless whiskey priest arrives at the port from which he might have made an escape, the narrative follows the priest’s journey in which his own purgation and self-knowledge grows in direct proportion to his ability to minister to those Catholics in need of
the sacraments. He knows himself to be a flawed priest who, in a state of drunkenness, has fathered a child, and having been stripped of comfort and the praise of the pious, now lives in fear of being caught and executed. He is tormented by his placing others in political jeopardy when they hide him from the authorities and moral jeopardy by tempting them to betray him for monetary reward.

His faith is tested anew at each place he hides from his pursuers. After arriving at a relatively safe place, he makes the fatal choice to return to the province in order to hear the confession of an American gangster, ensuring his own arrest and execution. The novel ends with the ideological conflict between the priest and the pursuing atheist lieutenant, drawing out the novel’s central oppositions and ironies: loyalty and betrayal, hope and despair, success and failure, the desire for peace and the necessity for subversive activity. The morning of his execution, the priest believes he has been a terrible disappointment to God, yet the structure and the texture of the story leave the reader with no doubt of his sanctity. Greene masterfully conveys a strikingly contemporary hagiography that has a popular and immediate appeal beyond its religious signification.

The novel contains all the obvious ingredients of what is considered the classic Catholic Novel. First, the whiskey priest is the “sinner at the heart of Christianity,” who realizes that Christ is intimately linked with every sinner: “It was for this world that Christ died; the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater glory lay around the death.... It was too easy to die for what was good ... it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt (The Power and the Glory 97). Second, the priest participated in a “mystical substitution,” a theological form of scapegoat in which the priest takes upon his shoulders all the sins not only of the world, but of the Church—its corrupt leaders, its superstitions—rightly pointed out to the priest by the lieutenant. Third there is an extended criticism of the materialist ideology of the lieutenant, as when the priest’s faith privileges the dignity of the individual: “that was the difference ... between his [the priest’s] faith and theirs, the political leaders of the people who cared only for things like the state, the republic: this child was more important that a whole continent” (82). And the lieutenant contemplates in Marxist fashion that “It was for these [children] he was fighting.... He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes—first the Church and then the foreigner and then the politician” (58). Finally, God as the Hound of Heaven pursuing the priest through the labyrinth of his fallen nature stands as the central religious lens of the novel, exposing God’s passionate love and mercy in the least expected of places.
Other manifestations of Greene’s Catholic imagination at work in the novel that decidedly locate his theological vision in the Catholic world before the Second Vatican Council. The most striking is the way that the understanding of Christ serves to illustrate a profoundly Catholic aesthetic in which an individual is grasped by the form of Christ and so is shaped by that form. In The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics (1982) the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar traces this theological aesthetic throughout Christian history and notes its prevalence in such French authors as Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac, both novelists of the European Catholic Revival during the early half of the twentieth century. Greene’s friendship with Mauriac and critical reading of his work is well-documented, and Greene appropriates many of the religious themes of these French Catholic writers. In this theological aesthetic, Christ becomes, in effect, the ultimate “Form” of God’s beauty, not only radiating the transcendental beauty of Absolute Being, but also expressing it in a definitive way, even when hidden in the mystery and painfulness of the Cross. In this light, the form of Christ stands as the measure of all being, granting a significance to all of creation beyond its singular significance. The believer’s participation in this Christ form is a continual unfolding of moments when Beauty, hidden in the ugliness and terror of life, shines forth. Ultimate participation is granted to the believer through the freely chosen self-sacrifice made out of love for such beauty.6

Greene’s specific genius is the imaginative way he places this aesthetic at work in the wasteland geography of a persecuted Church in Mexico. The whiskey priest undergoes a change of vision through his sinfulness and suffering. What he first thinks ugly—the poor, the prison hostages, the mestizo companion who betrays him—are now seen as manifestations of God’s presence. True to the notion of the “happy fault” of Adam’s sin, the priest’s spiritual enlightenment comes not because he disavows or escapes his sinfulness, but precisely because of it. In being brought low he sees the beauty of Christ shining forth or, as the priest reflects, in “the shock of human love” at watching his illegitimate daughter. Key to this understanding is the priest’s analogical understanding of the similarity in the dissimilarity of everyone he meets. As he attempts to flee the mestizo, the priest ruminates, “at the center of his own faith there always stood the convincing mystery—that we were made in God’s image. God was parent, but He was also the policeman, the criminal, the priest, the maniac, and the judge” (101). While in prison he is moved with affection for his fellow prisoners, noting that “he was just one criminal among a herd of criminals…. He had a sense of companionship which he had never experienced.
in the old days when pious people came kissing his black cotton glove” (128). And when a woman complains to him about the surrounding ugliness, the priest voices the heart of a theological aesthetic:

Such a lot of beauty. Saints talk about the beauty of suffering. Well, we are not saints, you and I. Suffering to us is just ugly. Scent and crowding and pain. That is beautiful in that corner—to them. It needs a lot of learning to see things with a saint’s eye: a saint gets a subtle taste for beauty. … When [they] saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination. (130-31)

The novel climaxes with the whiskey priest participating fully in the form of Christ by returning to the wounded criminal, an act of compassion and a commitment to that which he now sees as truly beautiful. His execution is a final participation in the Cross, and the text implies the full stature of the religious aesthetic in the final pages of the novel. In this way Greene actualizes a distinctly Catholic tradition of an analogical aesthetic, of putting on the form of Christ as the standard of one’s true self before God.

There is not only the symbolic weight of the alter Christus placed upon the character of the whiskey priest. If he stands as a representative of what sainthood might look like in Greene’s religious imagination, he also serves as the primary mediator of the presence of God through his sacramental service. Greene’s priest characters are ontological in nature—they are different and set apart not in moral virtue, but in virtue of their ritual functions. Such is true of the whiskey priest. When the young Coral Fellows asks the priest why he does not simply renounce his faith, he answers, “It’s impossible. There’s no way. I’m a priest. It’s out of my power” (40). Even Padre José, who has married his housekeeper and tries to live comfortably, suffers the pangs of conscience in betraying who and what he is before God. Acutely aware of the disjunction between his priestly duty and his own moral failure, the whiskey priest notes that “after a time the mystery became too great, a damned man putting God into the mouths of men: an odd sort of servant, that, for the devil” (60). When he tries to offer prayers for a dead infant, he can find nothing meaningful to say, yet realizes that “the Host was different … that was a fact—something you could touch” (151). And in his final conversation with the lieutenant, he retorts, “it doesn’t matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God into a man’s mouth just the same—and I can give him God’s pardon. It wouldn’t make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me” (195). This sense of a functional ex opere operato
expresses the ontological difference of both the priesthood and its mediating function that pervades Green's Catholic imagination.

On the surface of the text, the sacramental action of the priest is the sole vehicle to make God's grace present to the world, a religious vision that fits quite comfortably in the traditional Catholic sensibility of the early twentieth century. This understanding of priesthood emphasizes a vertical relationship to God in which all participate through the actions of the priest. Greene's imagination focuses on the stable mediation of the sacraments, specifically of Confession and Eucharist, as a means to save one's own soul. At first glance, a pietistic and private understanding of salvation is affirmed in the text. Twice the whiskey priest voices such thoughts: "The Church taught that it was every man's first duty to save his own soul" (65), and later, "I have to get to shelter—a man's first duty is to himself—even the Church taught that, in a way" (155). And yet these serve as ironic statements, for part of the priest's growth comes in rejecting the catechetical teachings of his Church because they act to truncate his faith and his ability to care for those in need of his consolation qua priest. So the text stresses dialectical, deconstructive language of the priest's insights in the midst of his experience of the analogical sacramental language of his faith. The tension is always there between the primacy of faith over a suspect institutionalization of that faith, and the mediating vision of the priest's sacramental role over a political State whose aim is to suppress that role.

A final aspect of Greene's religious imagination emerges in the ideological conflict between a persecuted Catholicism and a ruthless, secular socialism. This conflict structures the entire novel. The lieutenant, described throughout the text as priest-like in his cause to help the poor, desires to obliterate the Church even if it means shooting hostages to ensure the capture of the priest. For him, the loss of life is a small price to pay in order to be socially progressive, for the Church—and God—seems to support only the toleration of the abject poverty of the poor. The whiskey priest responds to the lieutenant with an argument that still cause many critics to cringe: "We've always said the poor are blessed and the rich are going to find it hard to get into heaven. Why should we make it hard for the poor man too? ... Why should we give the poor power? It's better to let him die in dirt and wake in heaven—so long as we don't push his face in the dirt" (199). Yet this quietism is tempered by a latent political theology in which the political is conveyed on the personal level. The whiskey priest articulates the temptation to abstraction inherent in secular progressive politics of the time. He attempts to convince his young daughter of her
personal worth over any political notion of the human person: "I love you. I am your father and I love you. Try to understand that you are so important.... You must take care of yourself because you are—so necessary. The president up in the capital goes guarded by men with guns—but my child you have all the angels of heaven" (82). In the end, the timely arrival of the priest's replacement in the book's final pages suggests that the ideological battle will be won, one person at a time.

Greene's Catholic imagination is fully engaged in the text; it is without doubt his novel that most closely resonates with the classical descriptions of the Catholic novel. Catholicism stands as a mythic and almost monologic voice, valorized in explicit ways in both style and structure. Though Greene's dialectical theological vision is present, there is no doubt of a certain and hard-won "glory" that permeates the novel. There is a triumph of faith at the expense of the political world. In this way, Greene's conversion to Catholicism and experience of faith mirrors the theological discourse of his times. In his later novels, the mythic and monological voice of Catholicism is attenuated. Just as Catholicism attempted to speak more openly to the modern world at the Second Vatican Council, Greene's religious imagination reflects more dialogic and ambitious contours. The Honorary Consul embodies these concerns.

The Honorary Consul: 1973

The Honorary Consul narrates the tyranny, corruption, terrorism, and overwhelming poverty that are part of the Latin American political world at the end of the twentieth century. The novel is a subtle and accomplished variation on Greene's continuing theme of the pursuit of personal salvation, but enacted in a more sophisticated political landscape. On the surface it is about adultery, betrayal, a botched political kidnapping, and a brutal shootout. Yet Greene returns to his preoccupation with religious faith and the many nuances of belief, disbelief, and unbelief that characterize the thematic material of his earlier novels. But here and in all of his later novels, the religious matrix has a decidedly different feel than in his previous works. It is more diffuse and tentative, less explicit and monolithic, in a more mutual dialogue with the time's social and political realities.

Eduardo Plarr is a doctor who lives in both physical and psychological exile in a border town between Argentina and Paraguay. Plarr is both Old World and New World, half British from his father, and half Paraguayan/Spanish from his mother. His father, a native Englishman, had been
devoted to liberation politics in Paraguay. Forced to leave his father at the age of fourteen, he and his mother have lived in relative safety in Argentina. Plarr venerates his father’s memory and nurtures the hope that he is still alive in a Paraguayan prison. He feels the guilt of his middle-class comfort and, in honor of his father, devotes his medical service to the poor. Apart from this one act of solidarity, Plarr is emotionally cut off from others, involving himself only in loveless relationships with married women, an exile from any community and any form of political or religious belief.

His self-absorbed, comfortable peace is shattered when he becomes an accomplice in a political kidnapping gone awry. A group of rebels from Paraguay plan to abduct the visiting American ambassador and hold him hostage in exchange for political prisoners. Plarr agrees to help them because two of the rebels are childhood friends who assure him that his father is part of the bargained-for release. Yet he believes little will come of the plan because the kidnappers are such novices. They end up kidnapping the wrong man, Charley Fortnum, who serves as an honorary British consul traveling with the ambassador. Charley is the cuckold whose young wife, Clara, is pregnant with Plarr’s child. So what begins as a simple farce for Plarr soon turns into an awkward and ultimately horrifying episode. As Plarr tries to find a way out of the debacle for all involved, he is shot and killed by the military police.

Plarr most resembles the typical character who populates Greene’s later novels—the jaded rationalist who casts an ironic glance at the wasteland of modern life. Given his clinical nature and inability to love, he merely dismisses life as an absurdity. Plarr fears the “cord of love,” claiming that love “is not a word in my vocabulary” (242). Only through his conversations with Leon Rivas, the former priest who leads the rebels, and with Charley Fortnum, the wounded hostage whom Plarr tries to save, does he gradually learn that his lack of love is itself a sickness that he has diagnosed incorrectly. By the end of the novel, love becomes for Plarr not so much an expression of sentiment but an act of courage. He learns that pain and fear are not merely medical and emotional problems to be conquered but are essential aspects of one’s humanity. Plarr submits in the end to the irrational demands of his heart. In a heroic act to bring peace and reconciliation he risks and loses his life to end the standoff.

Though Plarr considers his Catholic faith only a historical footnote to his Jesuit education, he is given the time and space in the rebel hideout to discover that faith might not be such an absurdity. He first torments his friend Leon with metaphysical questions about the ex-priest’s exotic theological views, yet he realizes that what his loss of faith has really effected in
him is a loss of hope in a more just future. Listening to the former priest, he is forced to face that “I can no longer mock a man for his beliefs, however absurd. I can only envy them” (232). As he envies Leon’s commitment to a religious vision, he is equally envious of Charley Fortnum’s genuine love for his wife, Clara, even after it is exposed that she and Plarr were having an affair. Leon’s commitment to justice and Charley’s commitment to love permits Plarr to imagine the existence of God as “a great joker somewhere who likes to give a twist to things” (249).

If Doctor Plarr is Greene’s incarnation of the doubting cynic thrust into conversion from unbelief to tentative belief, Leon Rivas is the postcolonial descendent of Greene’s whiskey priest of The Power and the Glory. The flawed pacifist priest of the persecuted Church of 1930s Mexico is transformed into the liberationist priest of violent action in The Honorary Consul. Leon is a militant revolutionary who preaches a gospel of freedom from both the tyranny of the institutional Church as well as from her alliance with capitalism and despotic regimes. Reared in upper-middle class comfort in Paraguay, he rebels against his own politically compromised father and searches for identity as a priest of the poor and the oppressed. Despairing of the Church and his own effectiveness as a priest, he leaves it, marries a peasant woman named Marta, and becomes an amateur rebel. In Father Leon, Greene captures the religious upheaval in Latin America and the development of liberation theology that occurred after the Vatican Council.

As with the whiskey priest of The Power and the Glory, Greene continues to convey an ontological character to Leon’s priesthood, for even though he has exiled himself from the Church, Leon is still very much a priest in the eyes of most people, even his wife. When an elderly man searches for a priest in the barrio where the rebels are hiding, Leon’s wife chides him saying, “I think you should have gone with the poor man, Father. His wife is dead and there is no priest to help him” (206). And unaware that Leon is a former priest, Charley Fortnum observes him cooking breakfast, noting that “as he held two half shells over the pan there was something in the position of his fingers which reminded Fortnum of that moment at the altar when a priest breaks the Host over the chalice” (126). As much as Leon corrects his wife and tries to wear the mask of a revolutionary, he is still confronted with the aesthetic and ontological apprehension of his vocation as priest.

If priesthood is still the main conduit of God’s grace—a vertical descent into the sacramental functions of priestly service—it is no longer the only conduit of such grace. Greene’s theological imagination broadens the
ways in which the presence of God is mediated, yet, in a very Greene-like manner, he diffuses the priestly function into the three main characters of the novel. His characters perform the role of priest for one another, offering compassion and committed service to each other. Eduardo Plarr, Leon Rivas, and Charley Fortnum, all disenfranchised or disinterested Catholics, realize to their surprise that their conversations and actions with one another have a priest-like cast to them. When Charley questions Fr. Leon about why he married, the text points to the inversion of sacramental functions: “[Leon] said in a low voice (he might have been kneeling in the confessional box himself), ‘I think it was anger and loneliness, Señor Fortnum’” (132). As the execution time nears, Leon urges Charley to receive the sacrament of confession, inadvertently ending up confessing his sins to Charley. And Greene draws a profoundly ironic implication of this shared ministry when Plarr and Leon meet their death. Plarr, the cynical man of science who has just risked his life for the sake of others, is drawn into the discursive orbit of the practice of the priesthood. In their final words to each other, they perform the Catholic formula of contrition and absolution, each voicing the other’s role, so that Fr. Leon is the penitent and Plarr is minister:

“Lie still,” Doctor Plarr said. “If they see either of us move they may shoot again. Don’t speak.”

“I am sorry ... I beg pardon ...” [said Leon]

“Ego te absolvo,” Doctor Plarr whispered in a flash of memory. (264)

Both Leon and Plarr’s final words before their death intimate a sharing in the mediation of God’s grace, a perhaps ironic portrayal of the “priesthood of all people” which was a central theme of the documents of Vatican II. Here grace is surprisingly manifested on the horizontal plane of their care and forgiveness of each other.

The doctrine of Christ is imaginatively understood in The Power and the Glory as a theological aesthetic of transformation into an alter Christus. The lowly whiskey priest is raised up in a participation with Christ who sacrifices himself for love’s sake. In The Honorary Consul, the doctrine of Christ is rendered in terms of the human struggle for justice. The Jesus of human history is given precedence over the high Christologies of faith, echoing much post-Vatican II theological scholarship. Salvation in Christ is seen in terms of liberation of the poor from those systems and structures that perpetuate injustices of class and race. Greene’s religious fusion of faith with political action marks all his works, and it is not surprising that he would find comfort and affinity with Latin American liberation theologies.
that developed after the Vatican Council. Gustavo Gutierrez, the father of liberation theology, published his English translation of *A Theology of Liberation* in 1973, the same year Greene published *The Honorary Consul*. Greene’s extensive visits to Latin America, his friendship with liberationist priests, and his own theological and political interests neatly intersect with the Latin American Church’s reading of the “signs of the times.”

Nowhere is this intersection more evident than in the dialogue of liberation theology with Marxism. Liberation theology uses the contemporary tools of the social sciences, at times borrowing elements of Marxist sociological analysis to provide a theoretical explanation for the existence of injustice. In the theological and hermeneutical use of the word “praxis,” liberation theologians argue that only action leads to the possibility for personal and communal transformation, giving value and truth to human agency. As Gutierrez observes, “Liberation theology would say that God is first contemplated and practiced, and only then thought about. What we mean by this is that worshipping God and doing his will are the necessary condition for thinking about him” (Gutierrez 28). If orthodoxy refers to those “correct beliefs” that traditionally function as normative for Christians, liberation theology stresses the importance of orthopraxis, or “correct action,” as the most basic norm of Christian faith. In this way Greene’s theological concern mirrors to a considerable extent liberation theology’s focus on orthopraxis as the normative standard for authentic faith, for his texts consistently suggest that “correct belief” plays a subordinate role in the faith of his characters and that “correct practice” is what distinguishes the religious from the non-religious person.

The theological and political vision of the novel is most clearly expressed in the formalized dialogue between Fr. Leon and Dr. Plarr. Leon explains to Plarr that he followed his conscience against the outright hypocrisy and complicity of the institutional Church, and left its trappings of privilege and social position. Yet he is still a man of some religious faith: “I never left the Church. Mine is only a separation, Eduardo, a separation by mutual consent, not a divorce. I shall never belong wholly to anyone else. Not even to Marta” (232). With a bit of fatalism, Leon states a profound understanding of the Church as sacrament: “How can I leave the Church? The Church is the world. The Church is this barrio, this room” (213). Where Plarr is trapped in his memory of a lost father and cynical about any future hope in finding him, Leon sees the historical movement of the Church and revolutionary politics as reason for hope. Merging a Marxist analysis of history with his religious faith, he claims, “The Church lives in time too … I think sometimes the memory of that...
man, that carpenter, can lift a few people out of the temporary Church of these terrible years, when the Archbishop sits down to dinner with the General, into the great Church beyond our time and place” (233). It is the memory of “that man,” the human face of Jesus proclaiming a kingdom of justice, which becomes the focus of Leon’s faith.

As the kidnappers’ situation gets more desperate, Leon is questioned about his motives, forcing him to speculate on the relationship of God to humanity in unorthodox dualisms. In doing so, he misappropriates the understanding of the *Imago Dei* into an *Imago Hominis*. In his view, the dialectical struggle of good and evil in human nature is reflected ontologically in God the Father, so that there must come about “the redemption of God as well as of Man.” He argues that “[God] made us in His image—and so our evil is His evil too. How could I love God if He were not like me? Divided like me? Tempted like me?” (239). Since God, according to Leon, has a “day-side” of goodness and a “night-side” of evil, God needs humanity in order for God to evolve into complete goodness. He tells Plarr, “I believe in Christ. ... I believe in the Cross and the Redemption. ... God’s good intention for once was completely fulfilled so that the night-side can never win more than a little victory here and there” (240). Human actions and God’s activity are linked so that “every evil act of ours strengthens His night-side, and every good one helps His day-side. We belong to Him and He belongs to us. But now at least we can be sure where evolution will end one day—it will end in a goodness like Christ’s” (240). The image of a suffering God implicated in evil seems to be the only image the priest can find which brings God close enough to give people courage in a revolutionary situation.

And yet the theology of revolutionary violence ultimately collapses when Leon refuses to kill the innocent honorary consul for the sake of the revolution. His theological image of a Manichaean God of good and evil proves to be an idol, for as David Leigh argues in his analysis of the novel, the text indicates that God in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ, embodies an already suffering Body—the people of the barrio—in the midst of evil (Leigh 23). Leon realizes that violence cannot overcome evil; only committed, non-violent love does. In the priest’s final hour of action—his own “orthopraxis”—he actually draws out a more orthodox theological vision. Leon’s personal, political, and religious identity is merged in the practical, tangible act of making faith in God present for himself and for others in his role as priest. He agrees to celebrate the Mass in the final hour before the police storm their hideout. The text suggests it is precisely as a Catholic priest that Leon brings a worthy contribution to the revolution,
fostering religious faith embodied in the popular religious rituals of the poor and of the celebration of the sacraments. The ritual practice of the faith of the poor is the ideological check on any overtly atheistic/ Marxist ideology. Greene made this same insightful point in an interview concerning the three cabinet-level priests in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua in the late 1980s, claiming, “the priests’ presence in the government of Nicaragua is a kind of guarantee against a completely Marxist state” (Couto 212).

Politically, nothing has changed in the final pages of the novel. That both Plarr and Leon seem to die superficially points to the futility of such worthy dreams of justice and liberation. But if the novel’s political geography has not changed, the religious landscape has undergone a subtle transformation. Dr. Plarr’s religious imagination is galvanized by his exposure to Fr. Leon’s commitment and Charley’s selfless love for his wife. Likewise, Leon’s identity as an effective witness to a just society is disclosed finally in his ministry as priest. The end of the novel privileges two places in which the religious and political imagination intersects: hope and love. Human hope can ground political belief only when it is experienced in a personal commitment to others, and human love has a stake not only in creating communities of commitment, but in the evolutionary union of humanity with God. Indeed, love is the transcendent signifier in the novel that keeps human action focused on correct practice.

In this way Greene weaves together Catholicism and Marxism as interpretive discourses to understand the human factor in the struggle for liberation. The novel bears witness to the ongoing development of Greene’s religious imagination. With the advent of the Vatican Council, Greene found in his Catholic faith a creative paradigm of prophetic proclamation that becomes embodied in his late novels and essays. The pilgrim nature of the Church in dialogue with the world, the emphasis on the humanity of Christ in the doctrine of the Incarnation, the subversive play with the “priesthood of all people,” and the standard of orthopraxis over orthodoxy in judging the veracity of religious faith, all show a nuanced and complex Catholic imagination in this novel.

It seems, then, that Greene’s continued theological reading and political engagement in the revolutions of the twentieth century elevates any fixed designation of the Catholic Novel out of the rigid confines of its past. Greene’s post-Vatican II novels offer a fresh perspective in which to chart how the discourse of Catholicism adds a dimension of meaning beyond the merely political, economic, and cultural ideologies that pervade much of literary criticism, especially Greene criticism. Likewise, these novels
offer Catholic discourse a plenitude of meaning beyond the emphasis of orthodoxy and authority that is such a part of the pre-Vatican II Church and, perhaps, beyond today’s Vatican Curia. Greene portrays characters involved with personal and political struggles of power, influence, and equality who, in the final analysis, point to and express choices and insight based on the reflective experience of committed love. The mysteriousness of such encounters intimates a moment of insight, transformation, or choice of action beyond the political and social reductionisms of ideology. In his theological reading of contemporary Catholic thinkers and in his focused fascination with exiles and priests, Greene creates an imaginative world in which theology and politics are in constant dialogue. His writing echoes the hopes and dreams of a religious faith creatively imagined in the midst of the real horrors of the twentieth century.

Loyola University, Chicago

NOTES

1. See Graham Greene: Modern Critical Views for certain negative criticisms of the Catholic novels. Frank Kermode takes Greene to task for his “neo-romantic” emphasis on Catholicism (38), while Bloom pontificates that Greene will be primarily remembered not for his religious novels, but for his thrillers, (4-8).


3. Greene, for example, had read and discussed in interviews and personal correspondence the works of the theologians, Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx, and he continued to read Newman’s texts through his life. See Mary Couto, pp. 209-220, for a detailed interview on the subject. In an unpublished letter from Greene to Hans Küng, dated 24 October 1989, he writes: “I was delighted to get your essay with its generous and individual dédicace. The admiration is all on my side and the gratitude for helping me to keep one foot in the Catholic Church. It’s a delight to add this essay to the five books [of yours] I have on my shelf.” (Personal letter, used with the permission of Hans Küng).

4. The above summary of the Council is taken in part from Theodore Fraser’s discussion of post-Vatican II developments and their effect on the Catholic Novel, pp. 143-151. See also The Documents of Vatican II, edited by Austin Flannery, O.P.
5. See David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, pp. 376-398, for a thorough discussion of the analogical and dialectical language of religious discourse.

6. See von Balthasar's long introduction in the *Aesthetics* for a concise reading of his understanding of a theological aesthetic, pp. 17-117. For a more complete discussion of this "Catholic aesthetic" as it works throughout *The Power and the Glory*, see Mark Bosco.

7. Greene visited Central and South America often in the last decades of his life and used his identity as a Catholic novelist as a privileged credential in order to investigate the postcolonial situation there. The essays and editorials from his travels highlight the central role that Catholicism was playing in these economically poor and oppressed nations. For evidence of his thought, see Greene's collection of essays and editorials in *Reflections* and *Yours Etc. Letters to the Press, 1943-1989*. See also Greene's memoir of General Omar Torrijos Herrera of Panama, *Getting to Know the General, the Story of an Involvement* where he speaks of his visits to Nicaragua during the Sandinista government's reign in the early 1980s.

**WORKS CITED**


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