DOI: 10.6017/lv.v10i1.11973

Shattered Legs, Softened Hearts: St. Ignatius, Flannery O'Connor, and the Mystery of Grace

Michael Infantine
Boston College – School of Theology and Ministry (Brighton, MA)

Abstract

What does it look like to cooperate with God's grace, and what does it look like to hide from it? In 1521, Ignatius of Loyola, an ambitious and promising young soldier in the Spanish army, is shot in the leg and suffers a career-ending injury that sparks his eventual conversion to Christianity. It would appear, looking back on this event, that grace came for Ignatius in a form that could only be recognized at the time as tragedy and senseless suffering. Four hundred thirty four years later, Flannery O'Connor, a young novelist from Georgia, writes the short story of a woman named Hulga who, after losing a leg in a shooting accident as a young girl, recedes into isolation and naked contempt for all those closest to her until one day a mysterious visitor knocks at the door of her family home. For Hulga too, grace may be out to find her in the place she might least expect. This paper will hold up the figures of St. Ignatius and Hulga as a comparative case study in which to examine the working out of God's grace in the economy of a human life. Ignatius, through his humility and loyalty to Christ in the wake of his injury, is an icon of God's grace and the conversion to which it calls him. Hulga, in her obstinate scorn and self-proclaimed superiority over all those who seek relationship with her, is the epitome of the one who resists the love of the Other. Even still, there may be hope for Hulga yet by the story's end.

Text

What does it look like to cooperate with God's grace, and what does it look like to hide from it? In 1521, Ignatius of Loyola, an ambitious and promising young soldier in the Spanish army, is shot in the leg and suffers a career-ending injury that sparks his eventual conversion experience. It would appear, looking back on this event, that grace came for Ignatius in a form that could only be recognized at the time as tragedy and senseless suffering. Four hundred and thirty-four years later, Flannery O'Connor, a young novelist from Georgia, writes the short story of a woman named Hulga. After having her leg shot off in a hunting accident as a young girl, Hulga recedes into isolation and naked contempt for all those closest to her until one day a

mysterious visitor knocks at the door of her family home. For Hulga too, in O'Connor's short story "Good Country People," grace may be out to find her in the place she might least expect.

So again, what does it look like to cooperate with God's grace, and what does it look like to hide from it? Grace is a big, slippery concept and is often most clearly seen in relief against the backdrop of the particulars of a human life. The lives of St. Ignatius of Loyola and of the fictional Hulga offer keen insights into the subtleties of God's grace in the economy of a human life, most notably in their markedly different responses to a shot in the leg.

It is something of a miracle that the details of St. Ignatius' spiritual journey ever came to light. After Ignatius had settled in Rome and began his tenure as the first Superior General of the Society of Jesus, he was asked time and again by his contemporaries to lay bare for them the story of his conversion, but Ignatius was reticent to disclose these details. On a summer morning in 1553, just three years before Ignatius' death, he heard a confession of vainglory from a younger priest, Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, and Ignatius was moved to share his own experience with the same temptation. It was only after seeing how consoled the emotional da Câmara was at this revelation that Ignatius was inspired to speak the whole of his spiritual journey to da Câmara, who diligently recorded it in writing.[1]

In "Good Country People," there is a hiddenness to Hulga too, but it is of a very different kind. In fact, Hulga's very name is a masking of her true identity, much to the chagrin of her mother, Mrs. Hopewell. As the narrator explains early in the story, "[Hulga's] name was really Joy but as soon as she was twenty-one and away from home, she had had it legally changed. Mrs. Hopewell was certain that Hulga had thought and thought until she had hit upon the ugliest name in any language. Then she had gone and had the beautiful name, Joy, changed without

[1] Luís Gonçalves da Câmara, *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Parmananda R. Divarkar, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), xxv-xxvi.

telling her mother until after she had done it. Her legal name was Hulga".[2] Hulga's mother, Mrs. Hopewell—a simple and well-meaning woman—gave her daughter a simple and well-meaning name: Joy. Hulga's response was to undo this, burying her given name at the very first moment she could. As it happens, Mrs. Hopewell's motherly intuition that her daughter's new name was chosen with discriminating taste on the basis of its sheer ugliness was well founded. A short while later in the story, the narrator continues, "[Hulga] considered the name her personal affair. She had arrived at it first purely on the basis of its ugly sound and then the full genius of its fitness had struck her. She had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called".[3] Early in her story, it is made clear that Hulga revels in her self-identification and its capacity to effectively distance her from the world. She engages in a literal act of autonomy, i.e. "self-naming," meant precisely to assert her autonomy and independence over and against the wishes of her mother. In the image of Vulcan, the ancient Roman God of fire and the forge, Hulga constructs and brandishes her new name, in all its ugliness, as both a wall to keep those who might come close at a distance and as a lever by which to exert some small amount of control over others, especially her mother. In the aftermath of their fateful injuries, St. Ignatius and O'Connor's Hulga take two distinct paths in their approaches to figuring out what their identities and their stories mean for themselves and for those around them. While Ignatius carefully and prayerfully discerns the relative value of maintaining the privacy of his conversion story and the extent to which sharing it could potentially inspire or harm his new and fragile religious order,

[2] Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People," in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, comp. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 271-291; 274.
[3] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 275.

Hulga seeks a different kind of personal hiddenness that only serves as a barrier to authentic relationship with others.

In a great flourish of dramatic irony, in 1521, the young, brash soldier Ignatius, in the middle of an enemy bombardment, gives an impassioned speech to his fellow soldiers, pleading with them not to surrender and instead to go forward with a battle that will eventually claim his leg.[4] Struck by a cannonball and stuck on bed rest, Ignatius had little to do while his leg healed but read the two books he was given: "a Life of Christ and a book of the lives of the saints".[5] As a young man, Ignatius' imagination and his ardent desire for political and military accomplishment had been formed by the tales of knights errant who performed fantastic and noble feats of arms in the service of ladies of honor, and yet reading of the lives of Christ and the saints now stirred in Ignatius the beginnings of a new desire. He felt pulled in opposite directions—on the one hand, his yearning for fame, fortune, and knightly adventure, and on the other, his newfound affection for the saints and his sincere desire to emulate their lifestyle. Torn between these two competing ways of life, Ignatius gave himself over to his first act of studied discernment: "When he was thinking of those things of the world, he took much delight in them, but afterwards, when he was tired and put them aside, he found himself dry and dissatisfied. But when he thought of going to Jerusalem barefoot, and of eating nothing but plain vegetables and of practicing all the other rigors that he saw in the saints, not only was he consoled when he had these thoughts but even after putting them aside he remained satisfied and joyful".[6] Ignatius' wounded leg became the occasion for a holistic reassessment of his identity and the fundamental desires in which that identity was constituted. As a young man, Ignatius wanted nobility and to

[4] da Câmara, *Pilgrim's Testament*, 4.
[5] da Câmara, *Pilgrim's Testament*, 7.
[6] da Câmara, *Pilgrim's Testament*, 9.

exercise virtue in the service of some grand cause, and in the wake of his injury, this man of lofty ambitions was opened to the possibility of finding the object ultimately worthy of those ambitions: a life in Christ.

In her own reflections on the workings of her stories, Flannery O'Connor explains that she tries to administer "the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it," and this is exactly how Hulga's leg functions for her in "Good Country People".[7] O'Connor tells that Hulga's mother excuses her daughter's generally surly attitude toward the world "because of the leg (which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten)".[8] For Hulga, her leg works for her much like her name as she uses it to "stump into the kitchen in the morning (she could walk without making the awful noise but she made it – Mrs. Hopewell was certain – because it was ugly-sounding)".[9] Hulga's false leg and its origin story are gruesome and off-putting—tools to be used at Hulga's convenience to push others away and to draw herself ever deeper into her own constructed identity.

One day however, this normal way of being is all thrown into question for Hulga at the hands of a travelling Bible salesman named Manley Pointer who happens upon her family home. Appearing to be an earnest if simple country boy, Mrs. Hopewell invites Manley to stay for supper. During the meal, Manley states that he'd like to become a pastor when he grows up, and when asked to explain his Bible selling ministry, he simply says, "He who losest his life shall find it".[10] Despite his apparent zeal for righteous Christian living, Manley and Hulga quickly take up an illicit romance in the family barn when Manley suddenly stops and whispers in

---

[7] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 275.
[8] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 274.
[9] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 275.
[10] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 280.

Hulga's ear, "Show me where your wooden leg joins on".[11] For the first time in her life, Hulga believes she has found someone who is interested in precisely the thing she has used for so long as a barrier. O'Connor writes that "she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her. She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away".[12] When Manley then reaches for Hulga's false leg, he is literally and figuratively reaching for what is most intimate and most vulnerable in Hulga's life. The fount and fortress of her insecurities and her self-wrought isolation is about to be accessed by another for the first time, and with great trepidation, Hulga consents to Manley's request: "This boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her. When after a minute, she said in a hoarse high voice, 'All right,' it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his".[13]

Unfortunately for Hulga, this joy is short lived. Once her wooden leg is detached, Manley refuses to give it back and takes out one of the Bibles from his trunk. It is hollowed out and contains a flask of whiskey, condoms, and obscene playing cards. With a final speech, Manley Pointer makes his exit: "'I hope you don't think,' he said in a lofty indignant tone, 'that I believe in that [Christian] crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up … One time I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long,' … and then [his] toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight"[14].

[11] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 288.
[12] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 288.
[13] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 289.
[14] O'Connor, "Good Country People," 290-91.

The thing Hulga cares for most deeply and which has most fundamentally shaped her identity, her leg, tragically shot off as a child, is now rent from her by a man little more than a stranger who turns out to be nothing at all what he seemed. In fact, the only character who rivals Manley's level of disingenuity in the story is Hulga herself, and perhaps this is her grace. In Manley, Hulga sees someone who has constructed an artificial exterior personality and who has given himself a new name in order to manipulate others and keep them where he wants them—she sees herself—and is disgusted.

O'Connor's stories are puzzling and even disquieting in their abrupt turns and characteristic use of violence. In an essay penned in 1963, O'Connor sheds light on this peculiar feature of her stories: "I have found," writes O'Connor, "that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work".[15] Flannery O'Connor conceives of these moments of shock not as ultimately disorienting, but as restoring her characters' ability to engage with the world as it really is—without pretense or self-deception—and so to engage with God. Teilhard de Chardin, in *The Divine Milieu*, provides a theological framework in which to understand O'Connor's vision of grace: "God must, in some way or other, make room for Himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us. And in order to assimilate us in Him, He must break the molecules of our being so as to re-cast and re-model us. The function of death is to provide the necessary entrance into our inmost selves".[16] Ignatius, through progressive and continual commitment to Christ following his initial wounding, allows his wound to become a decisive turning point in his life in which he is again and again emptied of his former visions of nobility and glory as a man of arms in order to be refilled with the

[15] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 112.
[16] Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 61.

fullness that can only be achieved through God's true calling for his life. Hulga puts up her wound as a wall to distance herself from others and bring about isolation, whereas Ignatius, by the very means of his injury, is opened to the possibility of being bound to Christ. Hulga tries and fails to gain the freedom that Ignatius finds only in relationship with Jesus. Eventually, however, even this defensive and isolating way of living is turned upside down for Hulga in her encounter with Manley. Hulga's story ends with her alone and delimbed in the barn loft. She has been exteriorly and interiorly taken apart; everything she thought she knew has been interrupted and questioned. We can only hope that Hulga might follow in the footsteps of St. Ignatius and, in the midst of her confusion and despair, see and respond to the mystery of grace.

Bibliography

da Câmara, Luís Gonçalves. *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. Translated by Parmananda R. Divarkar, S.J. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995.

de Chardin, Teilhard. *The Divine Milieu*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*. Edited by Robert Giroux. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.

O'Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*. Edited by Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969.