

PORTLAND

THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTLAND MAGAZINE WINTER 2001



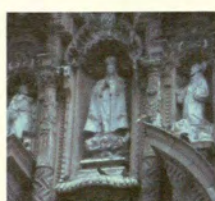
CHRISTOS



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Cover photograph by Wayne Aldridge of a Mexican folk sculpture. Note the symbols of the 12 apostles (top left to top right), pincers to remove the nails in Christ's hands, the rooster who crowed after Peter disowned Jesus, the dice cast for Jesus's seamless garment, and a skull representing the place where He was crucified: Golgotha, the Hill of Skulls.

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offer it up

By Tony Hillerman

Notes on his Catholic boyhood by one of the world's fine storytellers.

You must get acquainted with Mama, my hero. Without her understanding I would never have had a chance to wear the combat infantry badge, which we former grunts consider America's highest military decoration, nor would I have become a writer.

Mama's own life had taught her that youth must have its adventures, whatever the risk. (And she'd had adventures herself: homesteading 160 acres in what is now Beaver County, Oklahoma; and serving as an Army nurse in the First World War; and most of all marrying my dad, then a widower with two teenage daughters — now that was brave.)

She passed that wisdom along, and also somehow taught me that daydreaming has its values. Her most important lesson was to not be afraid of anything. Since God loves us, there is no rational justification for fear. If we do our part by using the good sense He gave us, He's not going to let anything happen that isn't somehow or other for our own good.

Mama could create a tale of magic for her kids while bandaging a skinned knee, canning beets, or turning the hand-cranked clothes wringer beside the washtub. She was our singer of songs, reader of fairy tales, maintainer of the conviction that we children (despite drought, Depression, and the poverty that engulfed our Pottawatomie County) had nothing to worry about except maintaining our purity, being kind to others, saving our souls, and making good grades. With Papa's help, she persuaded us that we were something special. We weren't just white trash. Great things awaited us. Much was expected of us. Bumps, bruises, and winter colds were not to be complained about; whining and self-pity were not allowed.

"Offer it up," Mama would say, hugging us while she said it. When life seemed awful, cruel, and unfair, Mama would remind us that it was just a brief trial we had to endure,

a race we had to run, a test we must pass as best we could. We were born, we'd live a little while, and we'd die. Then would come joy, the great reward, the Great Adventure, eternal life. So, children, never, never be afraid.

Papa's instructions were more specific. Our kinds of people never lie, never steal, never cheat. And maybe most important of all, Hillermans never judge others. We're all God's children and we'd leave the judging to God. That meant we couldn't be racist. But he never gave us a specific prohibition. For example, the autumn before he died he called my brother Barney and me in, told us he had been hearing some disturbing reports about the pool hall in Konawa. "I'd be disappointed if you boys went in there," he said, and I didn't go into a pool hall until years after he was dead. Or, when he discovered I had been missing the school bus and making the two-mile walk down to the South Canadian River to while away the hours daydreaming in the shade, telling me I might be happier staying home and helping with the work. I tried that one day, and never played hooky again.

Our church was built at the summit of Church Hill, the highest hill in our part of Oklahoma. Therefore when I sat in the shade of its trees to think boyhood thoughts I could (by Pottawatomie County standards) see forever. The hilltop was first to enjoy a breeze and the church interior was cool and dim, and breathed with the perfume of Sunday's incense, old wood, candle smoke, and a sense of God's presence. Sometimes the church was locked because of rumors that the Ku Klux Klan was planning arson. But I had become our self-appointed librarian and that gave me not only access but a reason to be whiling away my idle time atop Church Hill.

The library, of which I was both founder and sole patron, occupied a storeroom adjoining the sanctuary. Its books were the odds and ends left behind when the Benedictines moved their school to Shawnee to become St. Gregory's College. Some were in Latin, German, or French and undecipherable for me. I had found them

collecting dust in stacks of boxes one Sunday, nosing around after doing my turn as altar boy at Mass. I told the young pastor we had at the time I'd sort them out and make a list for him.

Making the list took many a month since I needed to sample contents before penciling in title, author, subject, and publication date into my Big Chief notebook. I started with Plutarch's *The Lives of Famous and Illustrious Men of Greece and Rome*, a sort of gossip account of the machinations and misdeeds of the movers and shakers of the Classic Age and pretty racy stuff for a sixth grader. Then followed Prescott's *Conquest of Peru* and *Conquest of Mexico*, Darwin's *Evolution of Species*, Washington Irving's *Conquest of Grenada*, and so forth. I dipped into *The Lives of the Saints* now and then for a change of pace.

Such reading provided an endless source of questions for Father Bernard to answer and answer he did. Darwin's theories, said he, didn't conflict with our biblical Genesis stories because we understood that in these God taught in poetic metaphor. The biblical "days" of creation represented eons of time. Humanity separated us from the other primates when God touched the first of us with self-knowledge of Him and of life, death, good, and evil. The evolution theory was simply a brilliant scientist's attempt to help us understand the dazzling complexity of God's creation—from the amazing strength of a grasshopper's legs to the way our brains translated the signals delivered by our optic nerves. Father Bernard made the Gospels equally simple. Christ tried to teach us that happiness lay in helping others, selfishness was the road to damnation. His bottom line always boiled down to God loves us. He gave us free will, permission to go to hell if we wanted, rules to follow if we preferred both a happy life and heaven, and a conscience to advise us along the way. □

*Tony Hillerman, whose "Navajo detective novels" are savored the world over, received an honorary doctorate on The Bluff this past May. This essay is drawn from his new memoir, *Seldom Disappointed*. Our thanks to Tony for prose and photographs.*



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TONY HILLERMAN