

Writer William Barrett Hits A Literary 'Homer'

Denver—William E. Barrett, one of the country's most prolific authors of fiction and non-fiction books on spiritual subjects, has brought back his most successful character: Homer Smith of "The Lilies of the Field."

In "The Glory Tent," a new novella by Barrett, the Negro Baptist ex-GI is again the central character in what might well become a long-running series, based on the popularity of the "Lilies" novella and the subsequent motion picture based on Barrett's story.

In "Lilies," Homer Smith helped some refugee Catholic nuns from East Germany build a chapel in a desert area west of the Rocky Mountains. In "The Glory Tent," Homer—continuing casually on his way home to South Carolina—stops in a Missouri town where a week-long revival meeting is advertised, hoping to pick up some work as a handyman and to attend the kind of meeting he remembered from his youth.

But when the revival troupe's preacher abruptly leaves, Homer finds himself talked into taking his place and, the revivalists believe, the possessor of healing powers when a young woman—who has been "crippled" traumatically—discovers that she can suddenly walk again. Homer is offered the opportunity to become "the world's greatest evangelist" but refuses to take advantage, believing that he had neither been chosen by God nor been equipped for such a vocation.

The immense popularity of the Homer Smith character (Sidney Poitier, who won an Oscar for playing Homer on the screen, recently visited with

Barrett in Denver and took away a copy of "Glory Tent") took Barrett by surprise, despite almost 40 years' experience as a professional writer.

"I've never been as wrong about anything," remarked Barrett, who said he created the Homer Smith character as a reaction to "all the stories of racial unrest, to show that Negroes can live and work together with Whites." Eventually, he added, an ecumenical twist to it, making Homer a Baptist who aids Catholic nuns.

"After a while I thought the whole idea was ridiculous, and it laid around in my desk drawer. I didn't think it would be published anywhere; I only put it down on paper because it was haunting me and I felt I had to get it out of my system."

Barrett eventually sent it to his publisher, Doubleday, in 1962, because a collection of his short stories was being planned "and I thought we could stick it in there." His editors thought otherwise, and "The Lilies of the Field" went on to become one of the best-selling novellas.

Barrett's familiarity with the worlds of religion and spirituality can be seen in a bibliography of his books, those recent and not so recent. Just published, along with "The Glory Tent," is Barrett's "The Red Lacquered Gate," his non-fiction story of the missionary Society of St. Columban and of its founder, Bishop Edward J. Galvin. After the election of Pope Paul, he wrote "Shepherd of Mankind," an intensely researched biography of the pontiff, and among his favorite works is his 1953 "The Shadows of the Images," a novel set in a Western city that dealt with

the problems of the Spanish-American minority and loss of faith.

In fact, a sermon Barrett once heard about loss of faith inspired what was—until "Lilies of the Field"—Barrett's most famous work, "The Left Hand of God," the story of an Irish American adventurer-pilot in China who impersonated a priest to save his life. That novel also became more popular because of a film adaptation—with Humphrey Bogart playing the impostor-priest.

In the sermon that inspired Barrett, the priest said something to effect that the most dramatic story in the world is

that of faith regained. Barrett added suspense to that story by having the faith-regainer being forced to pray—as the impostor-priest was in carrying out his masquerade.

Barrett, who started writing in the 1920s while serving as Southwest advertising manager for the Westinghouse Company, balks at the adjective "Catholic" being affixed to his novels:

"Any adjective before the word novel infers a subordination of art to propaganda. A novel with a qualifying adjective is less than a novel. I write in the realm of the body, mind and spirit. For the spiritual realm I often draw upon the

philosophy and symbolism with which I'm familiar. However, I deny the realism of any wide-scale novel in which no one prays. Besides, the things you can do with a human body are limited, even if you're an acrobat. I'm interested in what a man does as a result of his spiritual decisions."

But in Italy, a graduate student in literature who chose Barrett's work for her thesis concluded that Barrett's real contribution to religion-oriented literature is that his writing falls between the "pictorial novels" that are beneath many modern readers and the novels of Mauriac, Greene and Bergans, which are above many readers.

"There was a need in America," the student wrote, "of someone who could unite the moral value, so-called, to the element of entertainment, who

knew how to handle profound subjects in accessible style, who could bring into his books elevated moral themes without loading them down with excessive doctrinal and speculative content."

A reviewer for "The Newark News," in analyzing Barrett's work, put it this way: "The idea that a book cannot be beautifully written, moving and on the side of the angels, without being molasses-sweet and devoid of realism, is a popular misconception. It does, of course, take far greater experience and a much more disciplined technique to be able to write of the lovely verities without stumbling into the maudlin or wildly implausible—that is the reason such books are rare. But they are written and they are a delightful oasis in the desert of the ugly, the shocking and the cheap." — (Catholic Press Features)



—photo by Edmund Barrett
WILLIAM E. BARRETT

God's World

What Should The Parish Be?

By DENNIS J. GEANEY, O.S.A.

What is going to happen to the parish in this sudden convulsion of change in the Church? Everything else seems to be up for review. Will surgery be necessary and if so what are the survival chances of the patient?

The historical approach seems to be the best way of attacking any of these questions. What needs has the American Catholic parish fulfilled in the past, what needs is it fulfilling and leaving unfulfilled, what seem to be the needs of the future?

One Generation Back

The parish of my childhood represents fairly well American parishes from the Civil War, or the Irish potato famine, to World War II. It was close to the Cunard Lines pier which welcomed a steady flow of Irish immigrants to South Boston.

My parish was considered what we call a territorial parish, that is, not for any special nationality. Within its boundaries was a Lithuanian Church and at a distance too far to walk was a Polish church.

To call it an American parish of the melting pot type was a fiction. It was an Irish parish and no one was mistaken about it. It was true that Italians and others were welcome. They knew their place and gave us no trouble. My father, an Irish immigrant himself, referred to them as foreigners.

We had an annual St. Patrick's Day minstrel show which lasted three days. It was the big event of the year. My Lithuanian and Polish boyhood friends accepted all this and joined in the fun-making on our terms.

The people did not make any demands upon the priests except that they show up for Mass, confessions, sick calls, and funerals and keep chaste. Being friendly was a bonus; some were and some were not. It was not demanded.

During the depression, some immigrant parishes performed welfare services, such as calling City Hall to put heads of families on the pay roll, or provide relief for down-and-outers. People contributed generously to the parish because they knew that the priests would build fitting parochial monuments, such as churches, schools, rectories, and convents, the like of which they never had in the old country and the only worthwhile monuments they could identify with in this country. It would give them something of which they could be proud.

After World War II

After World War II the sons and daughters of the Catholic immigrants had different needs. They still had to build suburban parish plants, but the emphasis was not on monuments, but purely functional buildings. People transferred their parents' pride in church building to their newly built suburban home and their ability to pay off a twenty year mortgage.

With the education which their immigrant parents worked hard to provide, they learned to ask questions about the pur-

pose of a parish and the role of their priests. I am sure that many an Irish grandparent had reservations after all the Catholic education they had sweated to provide for their children, who now had the nerve and ingratitude to ask what the parish is all about and what the priest does with his time. To the parents, the priest was a sacred person who said the words of consecration and was learned beyond comprehension because of all the years he spent in the seminary.

Today, the American Catholic parish is no longer a receiving station for immigrant Catholics. It is no longer a naturalizing agent or a welfare agency. Most Catholics are not well able to formulate what they want from their parish. However, they seem to care less about and no longer see it as belonging to the core of their lives. It is ceasing to be a mark of identity.

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