

CATHOLIC COURIER

Diocese of Rochester

Thursday, April 25, 1991

75¢

16 pages



Fighting abuse

A youth group in Cayuga County offers peer support for teenagers struggling with drug addiction or the problems associated with dysfunctional families. Page 8

Faith forms authors' imaginations

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Graham Greene, who died April 3, objected to being called a Catholic writer.

Considered by most critics to be among the 20th century's leading novelists, Greene remarked in a 1980 interview with the *St. Anthony Messenger*, "I disagree with being classified as a Catholic writer, and have all along. ... I'm a writer who happens to be a Catholic."

Yet few could argue that Greene's Catholicism played an important role in many of his novels, including *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter* and *Brighton Rock*.

Greene was part of what seemed to be a watershed era for Catholic writers, with such novelists as Evelyn Waugh, Francois Mauriac, George Bernanos, and Flannery O'Connor gaining recognition not only for their writing skills, but also for the fact that they were Catholics.

Were one to scan today's literary horizon, few living writers would surface who could easily be labeled "Catholic." Among the possible exceptions are Andre Dubus (*Voices of the Moon*) and J.F. Powers — who belongs to an earlier era of writers, but resurfaced with 1988's *Wheat that Springeth Green* — both of whom openly proclaim their Catholicism, and, of course, Fathers Joseph Girzone and Andrew Greeley.

Yet the list of living Catholic novelists actually reads like a who's who of contemporary literature.

Among them are: William Kennedy (*Ironweed*); Louise Erdrich (*The Beet Queen*); Robert Stone (*A Flag for Sunrise*); Tony Hillerman (*Coyote Waits*); and Mary Gordon (*The Company of Women*).

Also on the list are the names of Jimmy Breslin, Christopher Buckley, Ralph McInerney, Joyce Carol Oates, David Plante and Wilfred Sheed.

And that list includes only those writers living in the United States.

Like Greene, many of them would hesitate to label themselves "Catholic" writers.

One reason for this reticence, noted William Griffen of *Publisher's Weekly*, is that the writers fear being labeled and, consequently, of finding their markets limited. Instead, he noted, they wish to produce novels for a mainstream audience.

"From a critical point of view, (their books) are not really counted as religious works," Griffen noted in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "They are considered literary works."

Griffen pointed out that Catholics, unlike members of some other Christian denominations, no longer feel obliged to openly proclaim their religious affiliations.

"I think there may be a compliment in that these (Catholic) writers have a religiously well-integrated life and they don't have to proselytize every moment of their lives," Griffen said. "The invisibility of the Catholic novelists may be one of their best achievements."

William Kennedy, for example, won the Pulitzer Prize, for his 1980 novel, *Ironweed*, a work filled with references to Catholic teachings and beliefs, and whose main characters are Catholics — albeit, fallen-away ones.

The story's action takes place over Halloween, and the novel's structure is based on the Catholic lectionary. The novel links the living and the dead spiritually, and uses resurrection as one of its major themes.

Kennedy later acknowledged that only one reviewer — Father George Hunt, SJ, of *America* magazine — spotted the novel's theological shape. The author further noted that *Ironweed* is loosely based on Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Like Greene, Kennedy does not identify himself as a Catholic novelist.

"I'm not a Catholic writer in the sense that I do not write about Catholic dogma," Kennedy explained in an interview during a visit to Rochester April 12. "What I do write about is the lives of people who are Catholics, and who have been raised in the Catholic faith and respond to life accordingly."

An Albany native, Kennedy said his education as a Catholic included four years in a Catholic high school and a bachelor's degree from Siena College. He also grew up in an Irish Catholic family, he said.

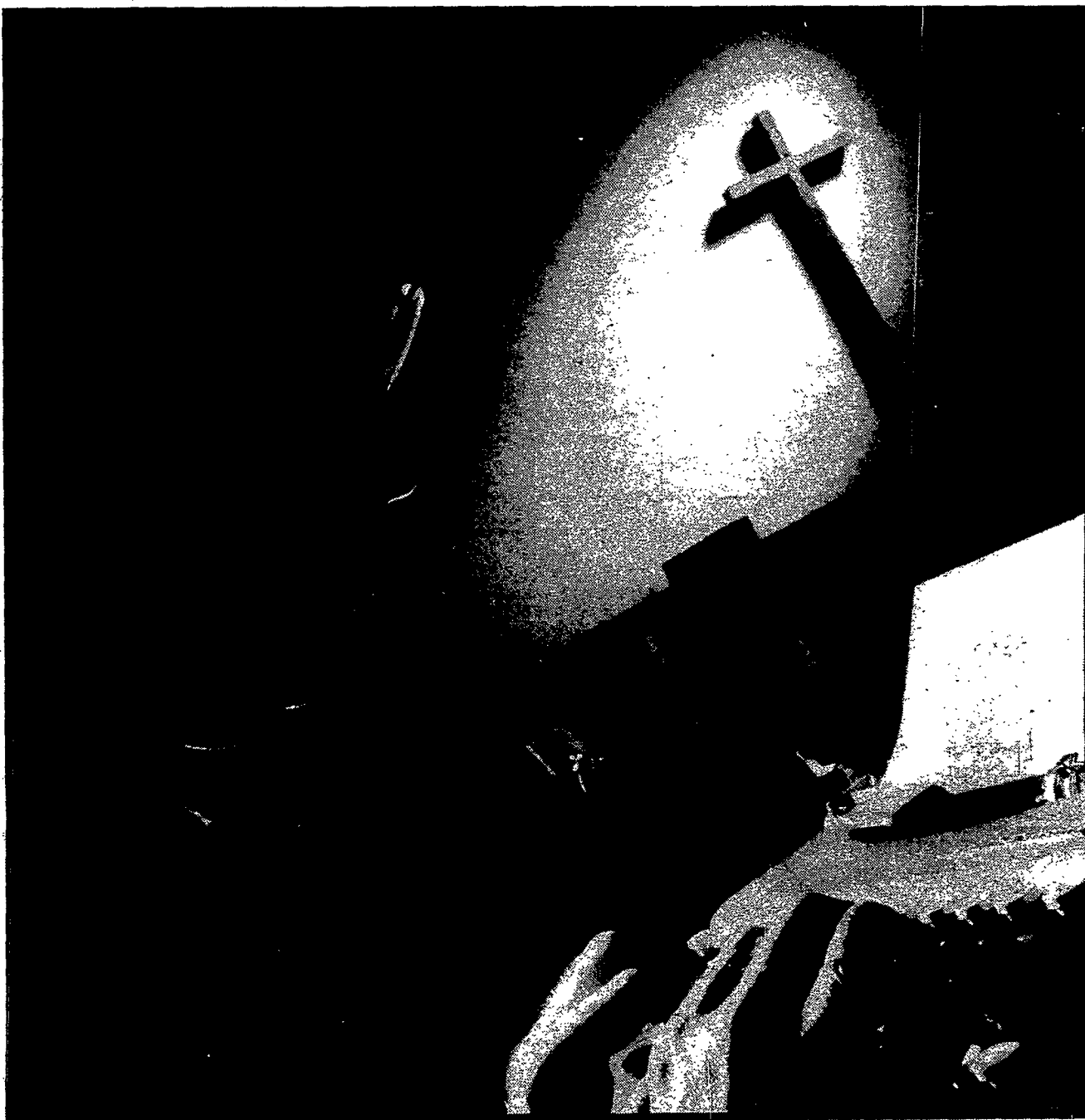


Photo illustration by Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

"Once you're indoctrinated as profoundly into a religion as soundly as I was," Kennedy observed, "you're not going to leave it behind. It's permanent baggage that you carry in your mind."

Indeed, Catholicism seems to take root early in writers' lives, noted Father Richard Blake, SJ, a member of the English Department at Syracuse's LeMoyne College and a film critic for *America*.

"It's ironic that so many Catholic authors, film makers and comedians return to their childhood and their childhood sense of religion," Father Blake observed in a telephone interview. "They keep going back to the nuns who taught them in school, or to what they learned on their mothers' knees."

"The parish church traditionally had a major influence on Catholics in the past more than any other influence," acknowledged Michael Farrell, senior editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*. National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company controls Sheed and Ward, a major Catholic publishing house.

"The major influences on your childhood will live in whatever you write, whether you like it or not," Farrell said during a telephone interview.

Those influences manifest themselves in the way one views the world, noted Father John Breslin, director of Georgetown University Press and editor of *The Substance of Things Hoped For*, an anthology of stories by Catholic writers.

Catholic writers, Father Breslin suggested in a telephone interview, have a "sense that there is something connected, there is an intimate and unbroken link between the physical and spiritual."

This perception that reality has several levels leads to a sense of irony — an awareness that beneath the surface lies other levels of understanding, Father Breslin said. An awareness of underlying layers to reality also gives

Catholic writers a strong sense of symbolism, Father Blake observed.

"I think this symbolic way of dealing with the universe is a way of dealing with reality," Father Blake said.

Thus, Father Blake continued, spiritual matters undergird the struggles characters undergo.

"The spiritual struggles take place in a physical context," Father Blake said, adding that such spiritual struggles are between good and evil within the conscience of people.

"There is something redemptive in that struggle," Father Blake said, "and if the redemption does not take place, that's tragedy."

Tragedy, Father Blake remarked, is often "the failure to see opportunities for grace."

Kennedy acknowledged that his Catholic upbringing enables him to see the spiritual dimensions of reality. "I seem to be very conscious of that dimension of life in all the people I write about — the dimension of the unknown, the spiritual," he said.

Even when a novelist does not deal with specifically Catholic characters or situations, a Catholic upbringing is often manifested through the ability to sense the spiritual, noted freelance writer Mitch Finley, who frequently reviews books for Catholic periodicals.

A case in point would be Tony Hillerman, who writes best-selling mystery novels involving Navaho detectives. The novels often explore Navaho spirituality, and an awareness of that spirituality frequently helps the detectives in solving crimes.

In a telephone interview, Finley suggested that Catholicism is what enables Hillerman to capture a sense of Navaho spirituality.

Finley cautioned, however, that Catholicism is only

Continued on page 14