

Commonweal

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Frank's Map

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Among the distinguishing characteristics of Irish Catholics—in America as much as Ireland—was our version of *omertà*: the code of silence. We never opened our mouths about the church outside the tribe. Most times we didn't do it among ourselves.

The English might have rammed their language down our throats, sneered at our primitiveness and meager mental capabilities, decided that it was better to let us perish or depart for America than to end our starvation—but, we had the One True Faith. When it came to chastity, piety, and moral propriety, they were pigs and we were paragons.

Only we weren't. But however corrupt, cynical, greedy, however imperfect our clergy, however distant and cruel our prelates, any criticism from within was collaboration with the enemy without—Protestants, atheists, nativists, Orangemen, King Billy, and the rest.

Frank McCourt, who died last month at seventy-eight, loathed the institutional church that he grew up in/under during the ultra-Catholic era of postcolonial Ireland, when Eamon De Valera and crew gave free reign to Eire's ayatollahs. (In the end, it worked about as well in Ireland as it has in Iran.) Living in squalor and poverty, he experienced first-hand the scorn and condescension of the pillars of the Irish-Catholic establishment: Church, State, and the Respectable Classes. ("Respectability and not alcohol," I once heard the novelist Maureen Howard say, "is the true 'curse of the Irish.'")

In Frank's eyes, an independent Ireland, guided by Holy Mother Church, not only internalized the contempt its colonial masters had once shown for Paddy, Bridget, and their spawn, but cultivated and perfected it. Long before fame arrived, Frank railed against the cruelty visited on the poor and the weak, and the authoritarian brutality of Catholic religious orders and institutions in carrying it out.

With the publication of *Angela's Ashes*, Frank demolished the old taboo. He hung out the dirty linen for the whole world to see. For this, he was accused by some of wild exaggerations and outright lies. Now he has been given official confirmation in the horror stories chronicled by the Irish government's Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. The commission itself, I believe, was in part a consequence of Frank's revolutionary act of truth-telling.

But here's where it gets complicated. Frank wasn't contemptuous of believers in general or Catholics in particular. On a trip



we took together to Ireland in 1998, he went to Mass with me on the Sunday morning we landed. He respected the fact that I had reached my own separate peace with the Catholic Church and returned to the sacraments. "It's a good thing," he told me, "you're raising your kids in the Catholic faith. At least they'll have a map to follow or throw away. In either case, they'll know where they are."

A fierce anticleric (and it got fiercer the higher you went on the ecclesiastical ladder), Frank admired priests and nuns who served among the weakest and the poor. I remember his special outrage at the murder of Sr. Ita Ford and the other American missionary women in El Salvador, in 1980.

Frank took the church at its word. He didn't write off as incidental the Beatitudes or the command to serve the "least of our brethren," the marginalized, the despised, the victimized, the stigmatized. When the church didn't live up to its rhetoric, when it turned arrogant and pompous, when it grew fat and rich, when it spent most of its time nitpicking and excommunicating, when its clergy became the acolytes of power and privilege, Frank's indignation turned savage.

But a part of Frank was always Catholic. He told me that the day he wrote the final pages of *Angela's Ashes* was October 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Frank always felt a special bond with Francis, a believer who lived the gospel as well as preached it. "But, you know," Frank said, "it was a great season altogether for finishing things. October 8 is the feast of St. Bridget [the Swedish queen named after the Irish saint], and a week later, October 15, the feast of Teresa of Avila. A trifecta of a time!"

The last social affair I saw him at, Frank informed me that "today is the feast of St. Athanasius, bishop, confessor, and doctor." How did he know such things? I don't know. But I do know he had his own map and followed it as best he could. I have every confidence it guided him home.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord,
And let perpetual light shine upon him. ■

Peter Quinn is the author of the novels *Banished Children of Eve* and *Hour of the Cat*.