



# Hemingway's Catholic Heart

Born as the Victorian era was breathing its last, Ernest Hemingway initially only knew the Protestant world of Oak Park where he grew up, not far from Chicago.

Later, while serving with the American Red Cross Ambulance Corps in Italy in the summer of 1918, the budding writer discovered the richness of Catholicism—with all five senses. He bathed in Mary's love and soaked up the redemptive reality of her son Jesus hanging on that wooden cross, writhing in pain, to his very sinews, the great European cathedrals he visited punctuating this reality. He was just seventeen. The experience was transformative.

He considered July 8, 1918, the day he became a Catholic. It was the day he stared down death and was "anointed" and absolved of all his sins.<sup>1</sup> Now he "called himself a Catholic", wrote Charles Scribner III, scion of the publishing family that brought Hemingway, the literary lion, to the world, starting with his classic, *The Sun Also Rises*.<sup>2</sup>

"A super-catholic", Hemingway wrote in early 1926 to his friend Ernest Walsh, an expatriate American poet and co-editor of the small but influential Paris magazine, *This Quarter*, where Hemingway's fiction was first published.<sup>3</sup>

It was during World War I that the American Red Cross Ambulance Corps had first enlisted motorized vehicles that could transport wounded soldiers with dispatch to medical facilities where they received life-saving care. Hemingway was serving on the front in Fossalta, Italy along the Piave River close to the action where he wanted to be. His job was to bring coffee,

chocolate, and cigarettes to the troops, now in the midst of routing the Austrians. It was a military campaign fraught with danger.

"Soon after midnight," wrote authorized biographer Carlos Baker, "one of the Austrian Minnewerfer crews sent another of their projectiles hurtling across the river . . . about the size of a five-gallon tin . . . 420 caliber . . . filled with steel rod fragments and miscellaneous metal junk."<sup>4</sup> As the soldiers and Hemingway huddled in the dugout, they could hear the menacing sound of the incoming mortar. It was a direct hit. Hemingway was knocked unconscious, shell fragments lodging in his right foot and knee, striking his thighs and hand, and grazing his scalp. "I tried to breathe," wrote Ernest afterwards, "but my breath would not come . . . the ground was torn up and in front of my head there was a splintered beam of wood. In the jolt of my head I heard somebody crying"<sup>5</sup> Two Italian soldiers between Hemingway and the site of impact got the worst of it. One was killed. The other, the one who was crying, had lost both legs. Hemingway, though gravely injured himself, immediately—instinctively—sprang into action, lifting up this wounded soul and carrying him to the first aid dugout. Not yet fully conscious in this compressed moment of self-sacrificing valor, he was awarded the Italian Croce di Guerra for his heroic deed.

Hemingway, a bloody mess himself, was transported to a schoolhouse near Fornaci, now converted into a temporary hospital, where he was treated with morphine and tetanus immune globulin to prevent lockjaw. As he lay waiting to be transported to

the train station for the trip to the hospital, unsure whether he would live or die, he was "really scared", he wrote years later to Thomas Welsh, and prayed "with almost tribal faith" for the intercession of "Our Lady and various saints".<sup>6</sup> As if on cue, "(t)he little priest from the Abruzzi came along the line of wounded men, murmuring the holy words, anointing each as he passed", wrote Baker. "He recognized Ernest and did the same for him."<sup>7</sup> The priest, Don Guiseppa Bianchi, had befriended Hemingway at the officers' mess hall, where the seventeen-year-old second lieutenant had privileges.

Their friendship would continue while Hemingway convalesced at the American Red Cross Hospital in Milan. Interestingly, the priest in *A Farewell to Arms* exactly mirrors Don Guiseppa down to "the cross in dark red velvet above the breast pocket of his gray tunic", as Hemingway wrote in this, his classic novel about a World War I Red Cross ambulance driver named Lt. Frederic Henry, played by future friend—and future fellow Catholic—Gary Cooper in Hollywood's first production of the novel.<sup>8</sup> While respecting the spirit of Evelyn Waugh, who wrote in his author's note to *Brideshead Revisited*—"I am not I; thou are not he or she; they are not they."—it is not hard to imagine the newly anointed Hemingway having a conversation with Don Giuseppi not unlike this one between the priest and Lt. Henry:

"In my country, it is understood that a man may love God. It is not a dirty joke."

"I understand."

He looked at me and smiled.

"You understand but you do not love God."

"No."

"You do not love Him at all?" he asked.

"I am afraid of Him in the night sometimes."

"You should love Him."

"I don't love much."

"Yes," he said. "You do. What you tell me about in the nights. That is not love. That is only passion and lust. When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve."

"I don't love."

"You will. I know you will. Then you will be happy."

Hemingway, in his quest for happiness, would ask his nurse, Agnes Von Kurowsky, to join him at the Cathedral of Milan for prayer<sup>9</sup> and Mass. While clearly smitten with Agnes (Catherine Barkley in the novel), he had also fallen in love with the faith he found in Italy.

On January 21, 1919, Hemingway hobbled down the gangplank of the *Guisepppe Verdi* in New York, where he was given a hero's welcome. Once back in Oak Park, he was lonely and missed Italy immensely. To make matters worse, in March, Agnes unceremoniously dumped him in a "Dear John" letter. On the rebound, in late 1920, he met and fell in love with Hadley Richardson from St. Louis, Missouri, who, like Agnes, was eight years his senior and had little interest in religion. They wed on September 3, 1921 at the village church in Horton Bay, Michigan, settling in Chicago for a time, before heading to Paris, where Hemingway's love of Catholicism was rekindled, if rarely practiced.

After the couple arrived in the City of Lights on December 20, 1921, Hemingway wrote his first short story, "Up in Michigan", but was slow to start churning out the features he owed the *Toronto Star*. He was more interested in writing "one true sentence". Once he got back to reporting,

one of his first articles covered Pope Pius XI's election. Soon thereafter, Hemingway overcame his shyness and met with Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein to whom Sherwood Anderson had written letters of introduction. Both American expatriates, they would prove central to Hemingway's development as a writer. He also began frequenting Silvia Beach's bookshop, Shakespeare & Company, where, among other writers, he met James Joyce, another key influence.



Hemingway achieved "one true sentence" with *Paris 1922*—"a series of carefully pruned statements", wrote Baker, "which he had worked out in his blue notebooks, mimicking Stein's habit of scribbling away in them, and then copied his writing in longhand on three telegraph blanks".<sup>10</sup> Of the ten, one powerfully and beautifully weaves in the famous cathedral dedicated to "Notre Dame" ("Our Lady"). "I have stood on the crowded back platform of a seven o'clock Batignolles bus", he wrote, "as it lurched along the wet lamp lit street while men who were going home to supper never looked up from their newspapers as we passed Notre Dame grey and dripping in the rain."

In December of that year, Hadley lost most of Ernest's writings, excluding *Paris 1922*.

While Hemingway's literary work recovered, the marriage, which was devoid of religion, never did. Yet, his continuing penchant for writing cathedrals into his literary portraits reveals the still-burning embers of his spirituality under the ashes of his marriage.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway's first novel, published in October 1926, the pro-

tagonist and narrator Jake Barnes relates his impressions of the cathedral in Bayonne, Spain:

At the end of the street I saw the cathedral and walked up toward it. The first time I saw it I thought the façade was ugly but I liked it now. I went inside. It was dim and dark and the pillars went high up, and there were people praying, and it smelt of incense, and there were some wonderful big windows. I knelt and started to pray.<sup>11</sup>

Then, too, the name Jake is inspired by the Rue Saint-Jacques in Paris, part of the Way of St. James which begins at Notre

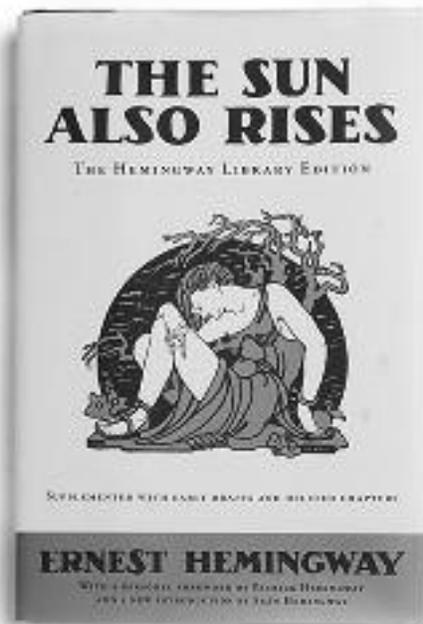
Dame and ends at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, where, legend has it, St. James' remains were transported by angels after he was martyred in Jerusalem. In Hemingway's second novel, Lt. Henry, who, like Hemingway, spent five months recuperating in the shadow of the Duomo, observes from his hospital bed that "[o]utside, the sun was up over the roof and I could see the points of the cathedral with the sunlight on them. I was clean inside and outside and waiting for the doctor."

Hemingway was waiting—indeed looking—for another doctor, a doctor for his soul.

During Christmas 1924 in Schruns, Austria, Hemingway wrote to his friend Harold Loeb (Robert Cohen in *The Sun Also Rises*) that he found "good crucifixes"<sup>12</sup> everywhere he hiked—his love of crucifixes, with the corpus of Christ on the cross, clearly signaling his Catholic heart, albeit a "fallen away"<sup>13</sup> heart which no longer formally practiced the Faith.

Early the next year, he met Pauline Pfeiffer, a devout Catholic, who was in Paris writing for *Vogue*. In what became a very complicated situation, the two fell in love and, by 1927, were engaged and married. As Hemingway was preparing for his second nuptials, he wrote in a letter to Father Vincent C. Donovan that, as Baker paraphrased it, he "had definitely set his house in order [his phrase]" with respect to reception of the sacraments.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, his marriage to Hadley, having occurred outside the Church, was annulled, after which Ernest and Pauline, along with their growing family, were regulars at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Key West. As the pastor, Father Dougherty, said: "Oh yes, he never misses Sunday Mass. . . . Easter duty? Most assuredly. Lovely wife and children, all of them Catholics, good Catholics too."<sup>15</sup>

Hemingway's embrace of Catholicism was quite a break from his formative years in Oak Park with its predominantly Protestant tempos and traditions where, it is said, "the saloons ended and the church steeples began". The stern brand of



Presbyterianism he grew up with forbade drinking, smoking and dancing—the slightest transgression provoking God's wrath. Such taboos notwithstanding, his maternal grandfather, Ernest Hall, known as "Abba", who worshipped at Grace Episcopal and enjoyed his cigars and shots of whisky, helped his grandson understand that Jesus was his "friend".

Hemingway had arrived in Europe not long after the last apparition of Our Lady of Fatima to the three shepherd children—Lucia, Francisco, and Jacinta—in Portugal on October 13, 1917. These apparitions were, for Hemingway, the biggest lure of Catholicism. He considered them incontrovertible evidence that the Church was the one true faith. As George Herter, a friend since the early 1920s, best known for his *Bull Cook and Authentic Historical Recipes and Practices*, wrote to H. R. Stoneback, on February 23, 1978:

Hemingway was a strong Catholic. His religion came mainly from the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. He told me several times that if there was no Bible, was no manmade Church laws, the apparitions proved beyond any doubt that the Catholic Church was the true church.<sup>16</sup>

Hemingway had written of his devotion

to Mary in his letter to Thomas Welsh, father of his fourth wife, and how much he had prayed for her intercession after being wounded in World War I.<sup>17</sup>

His continuing love of the mother of Jesus was evident when he wrote her into his 1954 novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*. The protagonist, Santiago, had promised to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre in Santiago, Cuba if he caught the fish he was pursuing.

"I am not religious", he said. "But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise."<sup>18</sup>

Santiago then proceeds to say one Hail Mary after another.

Hemingway did the same and, when he caught the biggest prize of all—the Nobel—he gave his gold medallion to Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre.

Surely, Our Lady was steering him to safe harbors—in spite of himself.

His checkered marital history, he incorrectly believed, precluded him from full communion with the Church. Certainly, during his affair with and marriage to fellow war correspondent Martha Gellhorn (1936–1945), he could not participate in the sacraments because Pauline was his wife in the eyes of the Church. He divorced Pauline in 1940 and married Gellhorn, who left him, just as Pauline predicted. When Pauline died on October 1, 1951, the way was opened wide for Hemingway to straighten out his marriage to Mary Welsh, which began in 1946. But he chose not to. Understandably, he had great remorse over leaving Hadley and his young son, John Hadley Nicanor, a.k.a., "Bumby", to whom he dedicated *The Sun Also Rises* and gave the book's proceeds. In later years he romanticized his relationship with Hadley as being his one true love.

When his Hollywood friend, Gary Cooper, sought Hemingway's approval, over Christmas 1950, of his plan to leave his wife, "Rocky", and marry *Fountainhead* (1949) co-star, Patricia Neal, twenty-five years his junior, Hemingway refused.

Further complications arose from his antagonism towards what he perceived as the Church's political stance, stemming from his bitter disagreement over what he perceived as the hierarchy's coddling of fascists during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), an antagonism reflected in his novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. But his Catholic heart still beat strongly. As he wrote in his letter to Welsh he “missed Ghostly comforts” when he failed to pray during that bloody civil war as he had done in World War I.

Then, in the fall of 1940, he met Cooper in Sun Valley, Idaho. It was shortly before the tragic demise of his friend, sometime Catholic F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald and Hemingway were, of course, the closest of friends in Paris, from the day they met in April 1925, two weeks after Scott's classic, *The Great Gatsby*, was published. Fitzgerald became Hemingway's biggest champion, essentially launching his literary career. But the friendship famously chilled.

The friendship with Cooper was different. Theirs was a warm, enduring camaraderie, characterized by hours conversing and drinking by the fire at the lodge in Sun Valley. And they shared a love of crosses—both men always carrying a little crucifix.

“As became more obvious in later life”, wrote Reynolds, “Hemingway was deeply drawn to all things medieval, which is to say all things ancient and Catholic.”<sup>19</sup> He would regularly visit the famous European cathedrals, showing piety and reverence. And, he attended Mass (although he did not receive communion because of his marital situation) and went to confession to a Jesuit priest named Don Andres, a close friend, until his death in 1955. He would also always observe rituals surrounding Christmas and Easter and other special feast days, as Mary Hemingway recounted for Stoneback. And he loved the Pope, as evidenced by his reaction in early October 1958, while driving with Mary to Ketchum, Idaho for the winter. As Baker writes, “(b)ulletins about the dying Pope Pius XII frequently interrupted the broadcasts. . . . Each time this happened, Ernest quietly

made the sign of the cross.”

Hemingway was a complex man with a simple faith. The hidden crucifixes, untrumpeted visits to cathedrals, and private celebrations of feast days are as much a part of Hemingway as his big game hunting, deep sea fishing, boxing, and bullfighting, which, he enthused, in conversations with Ralph Withington Church in the 1920s, provided “actual grace”.

Later, as Hemingway descended into severe mental illness, especially after his plane crashed in Africa in January 1954, when he used his head as a battering ram to escape from the burning plane, he was not the same person.

As Cooper lay dying in May 1961, contorting with pain, he wanted to provide his tortured friend with some spiritual solace. As A. E. Hotchner wrote, “When the pain had passed, Cooper reached his hand over to the bed table and picked up a crucifix, which he put on the pillow beside his head. . . . ‘Please give Papa [i.e., Hemingway] a message. It's important and you mustn't forget because I'll not be talking to him again. Tell him . . . that time I wondered if I made the right decision’—he moved the crucifix a little closer so that it touched his cheek—‘tell him’”, he said, referring to his conversion to Catholicism, “it was the best thing I ever did.”<sup>20</sup>

Cooper died on May 13, 1961, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. Hemingway would take his own life fifty days later on July 2, 1961. No one was there to rescue him that day at his home in Ketchum. Or maybe Someone was.

*Hemingway was given a Catholic burial, his gravesite blanketed with red roses.*

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