



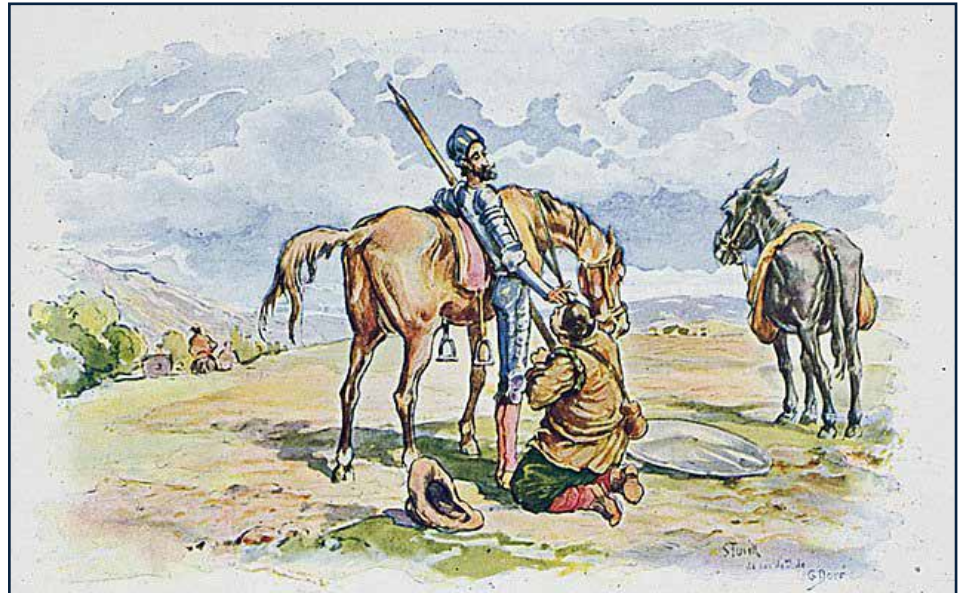
THE QUIXOTIC CATHOLIC

Hailed by many as both the first and the greatest novel ever written, the immortal adventures of the very mortal Knight of La Mancha are so indomitable and unique that they earned and engendered their own adjective. But the quixotic is not merely the stuff of impossible dreams but is also the broken reflection of bright truth that shimmers through the glass darkly.

Though Quixote often errs in his ideas—mistaking windmills for giants, sheep flocks for enemy armies, barber basins for mythical helmets, and strumpets for grand ladies—his ideals are always correct. Though his actions prove unreasonable in the last analysis, the faith behind them is reasonable, showing that the union of faith and reason can withstand the mistakes and the madness of imperfect creatures. Let it be said that this is not an excuse or an argument for error or irrationality, like a barrel of soul-buttering hogwash from Dickens' sycophantic Mr. Skimpole.

Such unctuous apple-polishing has nothing to do with being quixotic, for being quixotic has nothing to do with being quaint or cracked. It means being committed to the epitomes of reality and the intrinsic indissolubility of faith and reason. It means being a lover of sublime truth and being unafraid to suffer for it. It means enduring rejection while rejoicing in the journey. It means using the imagination to clearly see and understand the divine subsisting in the things that have been made. To be quixotic is to be Catholic, as not only the life of the novel shows but also the life of its creator.

Though full of wonderful adventures and uproarious humor and magnificent romanticism, the story of Don Quixote is largely a story of failure—constant, discouraging, humiliating failure. Both in spite of this and due to this, there are perspectives that render the story of Don Quixote anything but a failure, for despite how many times he is bodily or mentally conquered, Don Quixote's determination to do the good is never conquered.



That determination is central to the Catholic life and one that was also central to Cervantes' life. Cervantes' story is full of resilient optimism and sheds light on the unmistakable and indomitable Catholic spirit of the novel that his life produced.

Cervantes was born in 1547 in Alcalá, the son of a surgeon. Being a sixteenth century surgeon meant taking a stab at a malady, however invasively, besides performing pre-dentistry dental work and providing haircuts. The only thing suggestive about the surgical skills of Rodrigo Cervantes was that he was always packing up his family and going from town to town, fleeing patients and creditors. As a result of his father's failures, Cervantes was introduced to the roads of Spain at an early age and all the mishaps and miscreants that abound there.

Cervantes began his literary career in 1569 as a young man of 21, determined to become a poet in the glorious age of poetry that was prevalent in Spain at the time. But every poem Cervantes wrote was dismissed or ignored. He received no recognition for anything. Even when, in desperation, he took on ambitious and popular nationalist subjects, such as the verses he composed for

the death of Elizabeth of Valois, the third wife of King Philip II, he enjoyed no success, no acknowledgment, no encouragement. Cervantes was a total failure as a poet, but not for lack of trying.

At 22, Cervantes was involved in a duel with one Antonio de Segura under circumstances that are not clear to the historians. Though some say Cervantes was defeated and others say he wounded Segura, all agree that this event, obscure though it is, was a turning point in Cervantes' life, causing him to flee from Spain to Italy. Cervantes ended up in Rome and took a low-level clerical position for Cardinal Giulio Acquaviva. About that time, with the threat of Islam growing over Europe, Pope Pius V formed the Holy League to defend Christendom, and the Christian world gathered under the military leadership of Don John of Austria to resist the Muslim invasion.

Cervantes dropped everything and signed up for war. October 7, 1571, saw him aboard one of the galleys on the Bay of Patras for the Battle of Lepanto. But before the battle broke, Cervantes was sick and ordered to remain below by his commanding officer. When the ships of the Holy League clashed

with the ships of the Ottoman Empire, and the cry of unimaginable victory began to sound, Cervantes burst from below and landed fully armed upon the deck, where he was immediately shot twice in the chest while a cannonball sailed away with his left hand, “for the glory of the right”, as he used to say. Cervantes was a total failure as a soldier, but again, not for lack of trying.

Turning back to Spain after that heavenly-ordained victory, Cervantes looked forward to a hero’s return, for the soldiers who fought at Lepanto were welcomed home with favors, employment, financial and official patronage. But it was not to be for Miguel de Cervantes. On his way home, he was kidnapped by pirates, hauled to Algiers, and sold as a slave. He was held there for five years, and after many failed escape attempts, he was ransomed by Trinitarian priests and finally made it back to Spain, a penniless beggar. The line of having fought at Lepanto was overworn by then and Cervantes was shown the door without a shred of honor. He turned to writing plays and dramatic interludes, but like his poetry, it all came to nothing. He was a failure yet again.

Cervantes then became a supply commissioner for the Spanish Armada for their intended invasion of England to suppress the Protestantism of Queen Elizabeth, but that military endeavor was a complete disaster. So Cervantes tried his hand at being a merchant and entered the wheat business. But, due to some sort of improper transaction and a quibble of law, which seems by all accounts to have been a misunderstanding, Cervantes went to jail.

Upon release, he became a tax collector in Granada and was appointed to collect back taxes from citizens in arrears. Apparently, he did a fine job, collected the money that was due, put it in a bank, and submitted his report to the officials. But when those officials went to collect the funds from the bank, they found the place bankrupt, the money gone, and Cervantes went to jail again.

Cervantes began writing *Don Quixote* during this second imprisonment with plenty of inspiration from his own life to create this tumultuous tale of a hapless yet hopeful hero who repeatedly gets beaten and bruised, and is met with failure upon failure. Like Don Quixote, Cervantes always picked himself up, dusted himself off, and, like his joke about losing his left hand for the glory of the right, he always had a positive attitude

in the midst of his failures. Even though his life, and therefore his novel, was fraught with failure, Cervantes made clear that what makes life tolerable or intolerable, what makes it redeeming or damning, lies entirely in fallen creatures bearing up beneath their crosses with unfailing hope and pious purpose.

When *Don Quixote* was published in 1605, it was very well received, and Cervantes finally enjoyed some accolades for something he



had done. Ten years later, he completed the sequel of *Don Quixote*, the second part being even more humorous, exciting, and profound. What is incredible and ironic, though, is that the year before Part 2 was finished, a writer named Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda published his own sequel to *Don Quixote* called *El Quixote*, and it was terrible.

When the authentic sequel from Cervantes appeared, people thought they had already read it, been disappointed, and initially ignored Cervantes’ glorious conclusion to the adventures of Don Quixote—mistakenly spurning it. But as it was discovered, readers were delighted and relished Cervantes’ indignant awareness of Avellaneda’s appropriation of his characters. Don Quixote often refers to the imposter in Avellaneda’s book

and condemns him—the false Quixote—while praising himself, the real Quixote of Cervantes’ Part 1 (which history he has somehow read, even though Part 2 picks up right where Part 1 ended).

Shortly after joining the Congregation of the Slaves of the Blessed Sacrament, Cervantes died with a happy, resigned spirit on April 23, 1616 (the same date that Shakespeare died). He received last rites and passed to everlasting life. As a work of literature,

Don Quixote was revolutionary in presenting both a factual world and a fanciful world. It is satirical yet pious, balancing amusement and transcendence, whimsy and wisdom. It was the first of its kind in many ways. In Cervantes’ time, people devoured volumes of fantastic, far-fetched romances of whatever remained of the Spanish chivalric age. These books were filled with outlandish adventures, stock characters, supernatural beings, wild passions, sentimentalism, violence, and features commonly associated with fairy tales, but in quality and content they were much more like the modern bodice-ripping paperback. And the more they were read—especially with the dawn of the printing press—the more ludicrous and more lascivious they became. Cervantes parodies and criticizes these books by making Don Quixote bake his brains in reading them obsessively, but he also transports his novel out of such fantasy realms and into the real world while keeping a playful and profound foot in that genre. In doing this, Cervantes gave people what they had never seen in a work of fiction—real people and real places with all of the dust, hardship, weakness, inconvenience, misunderstandings, common problems, and bawdy humor—reacting to the glories of golden ages.

In short, Cervantes gave his readers a world that was totally recognizable, instead of the overblown melodramas they were used to, and people were just as enchanted and enthralled as they were with far-off kingdoms and impossible quests. They loved to see themselves in the pages of *Don Quixote*, even as it lampooned them and their customary literature. They loved to see their dreams and hopes sallying forth and being smashed, as dreams and hopes often are. Readers also latched onto the innovation of narrative dialogue which Cervantes introduced, and the day-to-day details in storytelling that recreated a point in time that was totally innovative.

With *Don Quixote*, the novel was born, and readers were carried away by both the ordi-

nariness and the extraordinariness, with Don Quixote as a perceptive lunatic and wise fool. This duality of *Don Quixote* goes beyond the character, reaching to almost every aspect of the novel, and making it almost an exercise of madness in and of itself. So Cervantes attacked the books people wasted their time and money on, but at the same time, he used their fancifulness to express an idealism that is beautiful and ennobling.

Perhaps the greatest iteration of *Don Quixote's* contrasts is that it is at once the funniest and most transcendent of books. Take for instance when Don Quixote arrives at a rundown inn he mistakes for a castle, and encounters some ladies “of easy virtue”, as Cervantes calls them. Seeing them as highborn ladies, however, Quixote speaks to them by the book in the most genteel terms imaginable. Of course, the girls burst out laughing at him, as they are the furthest thing from being fair maidens or noblewomen, but Quixote will not let it go. Before long, their scornful laughter disappears, and they begin to attend upon the lean, loony knight as princesses might, using kind and gentle words and doing their best to make him comfortable, as though they honored him as the knight he purported to be. At one moment people are laughing at this ridiculous figure; and at the next, they are moved as Don Quixote elevates the lowly with his lofty visions of beauty, giving an unforeseen grace and purpose to what seems at first glance to be lunacy.

Don Quixote may be crazy, but he sees and speaks something true in his high principles that leads people upward, even for a moment. In this way, Don Quixote is victorious in his failures, because he refuses to surrender the beauty of his vision, the truth of his ideals, and the goodness of his determination to pursue and protect these things as best as he can, even if he isn't the most effective knight in the world.

Impossible dreams of grandeur may seem senseless, and such ideals and their upholders do not fit easily in a world where the good, true, and beautiful have been abandoned, or worse, denied. But sometimes it takes the determination of a madman—or a seeming madman—to lead people out of that blindness and towards sharing a vision of the Divine. Don Quixote is just such a madman. And as a hero who fails and succeeds at once, the Knight of the Sorrowful Face is a unique Catholic figure.

Of course, the Catholic Faith is not about failure—it is about quite the opposite, even though it constantly deals with failure and

the consequences of failure. Catholics are well used to identifying the Faith with the image of failure—the Cross. But there is more to the Cross than an image of worldly failure, which Christ turned to unspeakable glory, and that is the seeming foolishness of the Cross. Don Quixote stands as an icon of the Catholic paradox of making an ass of yourself in the name of ideals and principles and realities—a religion—that the world thinks only madmen devote themselves to.

The current age wrestles with that truly mad, modern attitude of blind, indifferent ignorance about the invisible side of cre-



ation. But it is the believers who are dismissed as mad for cherishing ideals that are meaningful in themselves, and whose recognition often sparks an attitude of inspiration and aspiration, which makes the quest of Catholicism quixotic. The Christian life is full of quixotries. Many stories from Scripture and the lives of the saints have a quality that defies simple understanding, or that border on a sublime absurdity, flying in the face of what anyone might call normal human reasoning. Like the image of the cross, many of these stories are so familiar it is easy to overlook the enormous peculiarities they possess, qualities even like madness.

Though Don Quixote, as a character, is clearly out of his wits, *Don Quixote*, as a book, is about the *seeming* failure of reason. While Don Quixote was acting without a grasp of immediate reality, the various episodes of the book point to a higher reality. Though a man

of faith and farce, Don Quixote was not in the service of a fallacy, but rather a reality that wasn't immediately apparent because it was idealized. Quixote is mad simply in his refusal to surrender the ideal or abandon his vision of beauty to an ugly world. Even when he seems unreasonable or irrational, and acting without reason, he always acts *for* the right reason.

Don Quixote's anachronistic knighthood is a call for a renewed Catholic attitude defying the world when the world is wrong and taking the risk of embracing rejected truths. This way of good intentions, sudden perils, and terrible failures is the Catholic, quixotic challenge. Like Don Quixote, Catholics are called to sally forth undaunted, beating down discouragement, determined to be the challenger of mediocrity and the champion of sublimity. Catholics must learn to ride even if it be seemingly in vain, to tilt and perhaps be toppled for the truth.

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are (1 Cor 1:27–28).

It is never foolish to fight for the greater glory of God in defense of the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In turn, Don Quixote can be an inspiration as he charges, fights, falls, and gets back up again. Even to this day, Cervantes exhorts us to stay strong when persecuted for the sake of righteousness, to do what heaven commands even when the world condemns, to be conquered again and again, and to rise from the ashes again and again, and keep reaching for the heights.

All this is getting at the wonderful catechetical quality of Don Quixote's adventures, and it goes beyond the conventional debates of the tale—such as, why Cervantes' novel is considered the first modern novel, or whether Don Quixote is mad in a sane world or sane in a mad world. Figuring everything out about *Don Quixote* is not as essential as simply taking in the often-misunderstood example that Don Quixote presents in his blundering gallantry in the name of chivalry and Catholic knighthood.

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