

# The Rational / Romantic teeter-totter

Reflections on, & after our filmgroup's discussion of, "The Nun's Story" (1958 [1959])

**VCR box:** Warner Home Video. "What her religion demanded she [Audrey Hepburn] could not give." A glimpse at "the world behind convent walls" (before Vatican II, 1930-39).

**Director:** Fred Zinnemann ("High Noon," "A Man for All Seasons," "From Here to Eternity," "Julia"). The NYT review credits him with the wisdom of letting the viewer decide whether **Sister Luke** (nee Gabrielle) did right in leaving the nunnery (the monastic life): music might tilt toward yes or no, so the film ends in silence--I add, the satisfying counterpoint to the strict-order "Grand Silence" (exterior & interior) demanded of the conventicled sisters. Further evidence that the director intended to leave the yes/no to his audience: unlike the 1936 anti-monastic novel on which the film is based, the filmscript is evenhandedly appreciative/critical.

**Story:** Belgium to Belgian Congo, then back to Belgium. Daughter of a famous surgeon & herself an accomplished lab technician & surgical nurse, Gabrielle joins a strict RC order of nursing sisters &, upon full admission-submission-commission as a "bride of Christ," is sent to a hospital in the Congo, where she's disappointed to learn that she's to attend not Congolese but Europeans. To break her (strong) spirit, her superiors repeatedly deprive her of freedom to exercise her God-given gifts, & at one point even ask her to deceive her examiners by deliberately failing an examination--an instruction she just could not follow. (A monk reviewer judged the film accurate in its pre-Vatican-II severity, but wrote that he'd never encountered, or even heard of, any such over-the-top instruction.) Against her will, she's sent back to Belgium & assigned not to surgery but to the most dangerous section of a mental hospital. When the Nazis kill her father as he was attending a wounded soldier, she gave up her efforts to obey the rule of forgetting the past & the world out there--& (as it were) went over the wall (we are nudged into supposing) to join the nursing core of the French Resistance (the Underground).

1 The film was made in 1958, the year of the (Brussels) World's Fair. Loree & I were in Belgium, & at the Fair spent half our time in the standout exhibit, the Belgium Congo's, which gave no hint of the Belgian empire's abysmal treatment of its subject peoples (e.g., when Belgium, not long after, lost the Congo, the total number of Congolese who'd ever gone to college was only 17).

2 Like a sermon, the film begins with a spoken text (from Jesus, but the source unidentified): "He that will lose his life shall find it." The second sentence says that anyone entering monastic life "has sacrificed his life to God." To the traditional monastic poverty/chastity/obedience rule-specs, this order added silence. The supervisor of postulants explains to Gabrielle (soon, Sister Luke) that it's "a life against nature...[in honor of] our Lord Jesus Christ"; the entry-stages are "steps toward a closer union with our crucified Lord." As calls to prayer, "the bells...[are] the voice of God" (to be instantly obeyed, she later learns, even when they demand that she interrupt surgery!--a rule the Congo hospital surgeon [Peter Finch] refused his nurses permission to obey).

3 Christianity permits (some say encourages) cruciform life against nature, but the stern works-righteousness is sub-Christian in being against grace. "Thank God for the Reformation!" I burst out at one point of our discussion. Sister Luke is (as Luther was) given a whip for self-flagellation, but concludes she just can't beat the virtues into herself by combining self-abuse with obedience to abusive directives (such as to learn humility--make herself humble!--by deliberately failing that exam (so a less well-prepared sister could get the medical job). Again, thank God for the solas (sola gratia/fides/scriptura): salvation is not by our good works but "only" by grace/faith/Scripture.

**HISTORICAL NOTE:** The film was released in 1959, three years before Vatican II began! I know of no direct influence on the 1962-5 deliberations, but the fact that the film was not condemned by the RC Church shows that "the times, they are a-changin'" was in the air leading to Vatican II.

4 Is the film anti-Catholic? No, but anti-severe-Catholic--as were the several hundred RC priests/brothers/sisters I had in my NYTSeminary classes (in Turtle Bay, near the UN) soon after Vatican II. In the West (US & Europe), the 1960s tipped the cultural teeter-totter radically from the rational-straight '50s to the romantic-loose '70s (one baneful effect of the relaxation being a steep increase in pederasty among RC priests). The rigorism we see in the film tilted soon into reactive latitudinarianism. Strict-monk Luther was shocked, on his only visit, by loose Rome; & he returned to Germany determined to balance the rational & the romantic in his own life.

5 Pre-Katrina New Orleans was called a Catholic oasis (with the extremes of nuns in daylight & nudes at night) in a Southern Baptist desert. In condemning

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monasticism & weakening the hold of institutional religion (e.g., the general abandonment of the formal priestly confessional, for "the priesthood of all believers"), Protestantism preached personal character (the inner monk/nun of self-discipline) with communal support & correction. The so-human tendency to see-saw to the opposite extreme, however, took over: Luther was soon accused of encouraging antinomian anarchy, the reverse of RC collective tyranny.

6 A third teeter-totter is within romanticism itself, the feeling world full of beautiful marble-spheres (in contrast to the reasoning world full of building blocks). The Great Commission (to spread the gospel of God's costly love & call) is motored by the Great Commandment (to love God/world/self). While monasticism's body is the rational ordering of life, its soul is radical pietism, viz. all-consuming love for God exclusive of affectional-sexual ("romantic") love (so, characteristic of all monasticism, the vow of chastity). At the other end of the love see-saw is all-consuming, God-excluding affectional-sexual love for another human being, expressed in thousands of ballads. The former is well expressed in Pope Jn. Paul's 1979 "My Rosary," & the latter in Robt. Cameron Rogers' secular poem of the same title (a poem the child of the past within me sometimes hears, for it was one I heard my parents sing at home): "The hours I spent with thee, dear heart, / Are as a string of pearls to me; / I count them over, every one apart, / My rosary, my rosary. // ...I kiss each bead and strive at last to learn / To kiss the cross, / Sweetheart, / To kiss the cross." (Not Jesus' cross, but the cross of lost but sweetly remembered affectional-sexual human love.)

America's infotainment world is full of sports, egregious violence, & idolatrous (divine-claiming, God-excluding) sex--the whole driven by the idolatrouly-called almighty dollar. When we step back from this pervasive-attentional tyranny, does it not seem (in its way) as oppressive as was Sister Luke's monastic order (in its own way)? In this light, what sort of churches ought ours to be? And what sort of inner conflict should ours be (as Sister Luke's was between nun & nurse: "I've been struggling all these years" between institution & mission)?

7 The heart of what Christians say as Christians is "Jesus is Lord": we are to yield ourselves, our individuality & our hopes, to no lesser leadership, not even a Christian spiritual director (as Sister Luke was expected to do, & found she could not). From Br. Lawrence's "The Practice of the Presence of God" to today's "centering prayer," we are to live (to use Tillich's three terms) beyond both heteronomy (being led by others/institutions/movements) & autonomy (as, literally, "a law unto [my]self") in theonomy (in communion with, & under the rule & direction of, the Holy Trinity). Not "obedience to the bells"! Not "I do my thing, you do your thing"! And not the false either/or pressed on Sister Luke, to serve either God or humanity. Rather, life radiantly lived in the Great Commandment.

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