

Fr. O'Toole and his Poetry

Rev. J. VandenBossche, CSC

In the months spent sorting, accessing and filing the papers of Fr. O'Toole, I learned about an unusual man: A scholar and a teacher, he spent most of his life as an administrator. Contrary to the judgments of many men, he showed two qualities that really struck me. First was the sense of humor expressed in the doggerel he wrote so extensively. We have hundreds of pages from his time as provincial, with the students at Cardinal Newman College and at Holy Cross School in New Orleans. . A second quality shows in the hundreds of letters of condolence that he wrote in the midst of his busiest years as an administrator. They are filled with empathy and show great creativity. To do them justice will take at least another paper.. At this time I will treat only a few poems. Where I can I will try to date these and name the men I believe were involved. He put his initials on the pieces he wrote but he gave no dates.

There is a short one about his trip to the Holy Land, in 1948:

"I trod those wide and smooth-worn stones
That lead to Golgotha.
For me there clings about them still
The fragrance of those sacred feet
Which painfully explored each one,
Marked it for posterity,
Blazing a trail for those who wished to follow."

"If you wish to come after me, take up your cross
And follow me".

Then there were a lot of trivia such as this dedicated to:

Mary K. and L.A.

Have you ever seriously thought, dear gals
How fortunate you are
To live with a budding poet
And a potential Hollywood star?

These verses now must have an end
Before I go too far
And be labeled by some students
As just bit bizarre.

Comment [FJVC1]:

Comment [FJVC2]:

Comment [FJVC3]:

Comment [FJVC4]:

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Comment [FJVC5]:

And a bit of meditation which I dearly love: They remind me of my own meditations on the mysteries of the Rosary.. Christ became for him an adolescent, a young man and he acted like I did in my own time.

JESUS

Jesus, when you broke your fast
At Mary's simple meals
Did you dream of other Bread
That nourishes and heals.

Jesus, when at Nazareth,
Did you join with other boys
And really enter into
Their childhood games and joys?

When Joseph taught you, Jesus
To work with adze and plane
Did that not remind you
Of wood your blood would stain

Lower gently, lay him softly\
Near his aching mother's breast.
Once the babe she nursed and swaddled
With equal tenderness she lays to rest.

JOSEPH

Joseph, when you turned to home,
After the work of the day,
What did Jesus talk about
As you walked with him on the way?

He seemed to enjoy writing about the priests, sometimes with tongue in cheek and then taking a shot at some characteristic that needed correction or change. This first one is evidently about himself as provincial.

The Traveler

I think that I shall never see
An itinerant padre such as he
A padre who always on the go:

Comment [FJVC6]:

Comment [FJVC7]:

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For him there's no such word as slow
Mexico is on his list
And Acapulco's never missed.
In Fall he visits Notre Dame
And mixes business with a game
That just happens to be played –
A providential sign to be heeded and obeyed.
Now and then he's back at home
If something's happening at the Dome.
For the NFL concerns him much
The players weight and height and speed and such.
Of course he is very fond of sports
Whether in or out of sorts.
And when his favorite Saints are "creamed"
Our dear Provincial's really "steamed".
He tries to be quite cool and mum;
His sentiments: Throw out the BUM: (Bum Phillips, the coach)
He carries always by his side
An expansive travel guide
Which enables him to plan his trips –
By train or bus, by air or ships.
Now he's home to answer letters
Especially those written by his betters.
You ask me: "where's he off to next?"
Sorry! I don't have his text.
In any case he's with us here
And so let's raise a rousing cheer:
To him and all a glorious day –
A happy, joyful holiday!

CJOT

The next poem is without title or signature but is just delightful:

I think that I shall never see
A zealous pastor such as he.
A Pastor who would always wear
His purple slacks with so much flair
A pastor who would always feign
That funds were low despite a gain.
A pastor who just loved to shop
That is, when cost began to drop
A pastor who shied clear of debt
And kept close tabs on weekly net.

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A pastor who paid every bill
And dreaded most an empty till..
Pastors, it seems, are here to stay\
But curates, too, will have their day.

The next poem is about a very dear friend and compatriot, Msgu. Doheny, CSC who sent financial help when Fr. O'Toole was having difficulty getting a new province under way. .”

I once knew a prelate who sat on the Rota
And worked day and night to render his vota
But when asked any questions he always replied:
These matters to me are ignota. (unknown)

There once was a prelate of Rota capacity
Who devoured the Law with a mental rapacity.
He read it by day and he read it by night
To enforce, as he said, his canonical might

One day he lay dying full of wisdom and years
As his colleagues around him sore tried by their tears
Prayed mighty “ne in ignem portetur”
(may he not be put in the fire)
There fell from his lips these soul-stirring words:
“Sede vacante nihil innovetur”.
(When the seat of the pope is empty nothing is done)

This next poem gives me no clue about whom it is written. It is certainly for the time when he was provincial and having problems with young clerics.

A MODERN CLERIC

I think that I shall never see
A modern cleric such as he.
He's been ordained a few short years
But now it plainly appears
That he's inspired from on high
To buck his bishop, do or die
He schemes and plans with all his peers
To fight what he profoundly fears
A bishop who's made up his mind
To stand for doctrine that's defined.
For him the sensible solution
For guilt is general absolution.
On morality he takes a good, broad stance

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And rarely shuns a chance to dance
To be a priest does not imply
That I should quietly sit by

And listen to that Rock and Roll
That stirs me to my very soul.
And so I'll join the maddening crowd
And wont my parishioners be wowed?

CJOT

I knew this next man when I was a collegian living in Moreau Seminary and he was a student priest living in the house. The only memory I have of him was the request he made to the sacristan to place his large host outside the window on the sill, that being cold it would break more easily without crumbs. (In 1946 we did not have a refrigerator in the sacristy.)

The Rev Elmer V. Rupp

We have in the province a priest named Rupp
Who invited us with him to sup.
We repaired at once to his rectory
And gathered in the refectory.
The table appeared to be rather bare
Certainly not groaning under weight of the fare
We sat there politely with tact and finesse
And engaged in discourse with profound politesse
At length the ecclesiastical chef came alive
And portions of food began to arrive,
First came the meat loaf browned to perfection
And each of us shared a quite modest section.
Next came potatoes mashed to a pulp
The servings prepared disappeared in one gulp.
A portion of beans came a bit late
But helped, all the same, our hunger to sate.
For desert the pastor opened a tin
The label was lacking – the result chagrin.
Instead of peaches which the Pastor expected
There emerged some content quite undetected.
The mistake he made was a bit glaring
Instead of peaches we beheld pickled herring.
The moral is: be sure of your label
Before you place food on the table.

O'Toole

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Fr. O'Toole did not fear to publish his works and we find in the Province Review (April, 1977) the following written about Fr Jeremiah Buttomer, pastor of St. Johns Parish, Marble Falls, Texas.

We have a priest named Jeremiah.
Who greets us with a pleasant Hi Ya!
He lives alone at Marble Falls
The parish boundries his only walls
He rises early at four in the morning
When dawn of day is just a-borning
His problem in preaching is termination
And parishioners sigh in mute resignation
In spring his lawn is clad with blue-bonnets
About which poets have written rare sonnets.
He contemplates nature, birds and bees
Fanned by a gentle springtime breeze
His life is austere, his diet spare,
He shuns, on principle, restaurant fare.
For visiting priest who come to replace him
The prospects, food-wise, are a bit grim
But the scenery is great and the air so fine
That no one worries about where he's to dine.
In this pleasant spot days gently slip by
If you wish real repose, to Marble Falls hie.
The pot is hallowed by the Pastor in charge
As he dreams of days when he fished with Sarge.

Comment [FJVC8]:

Comment [FJVC9]:

Comment [FJVC10]:

(Sarge was Fr. Harry Stegman, CSC)

In the years after Fr.O'Toole was provincial, he worked hard to start Cardinal Newman College in St. Louis. This led a large collection of poetry about the life of the students.

THE PUB

There's a little joint called Whalen's
Down the road a bit
Where weary Newman studnts
Come, at time, to sip and sit.

The owner is quite jolly
And easily makes friends
While conversing with his clients
As his supple elbow bends

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The Newman students, generally
As they happily relax
Call for Coke and sarsaparilla
And eschew the Busch six packs

At time a guileless student
May overstep the bounds
And be caught by watchman Cletus
As h makes his nightly rounds.

But his is an exception
For our students are discreet
Their daily habits governed
By what is just and meet,

Although the guys of twenty-one
Are inclined to stronger brew
They call a halt at potent stuff
Like Ozark Mountain Dew.

At times I'm somewhat troubled
By this Whalen pub
And I hope it's never haunted
By the chap called Beelzebub.

CJPT

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There are number of poems about sports and the college team beginning with this one about soccer.

THE BRIGADEERS

At last we have a soccer tea
Alert, all set to go,
Resolved determined come what may
To simply never blow.

The first game of the season
Which means so much to us
And for Cardinal Newman College
Will be stunning plus.

They are a group of expert players
This quad of "82"
And we know that they'll bring luster
To our colors – red and blue.

With courage and with spirit
They'll fight for CNC
And return, heads high in triumph
On the wings of victory.

Sockhurst is a stepping stone
To an ever greater fame
To which our bright, new soccer team
Will soon, we hope, lay claim.

Let's set the rafters ringing
With a cheer for the coach and team;
Their hopes are high, resolves are strong
They're really on the beam.

They're out to set a record
These Marines of CNC
And meet the toughest challenge
Whatever that may be.

We'll stand behind our players
Whether they lose or win.
Victory we'll greet with joy
And loss without chagrin.

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Now let's raise a tremendous cheer
For the red and for the blue
And for our glorious soccer team
Prepared for derringdo.

ILLINOIS JOE

We have a chap at the College
Who comes from Illinois
The beautiful land of Lincoln
And the home of the bean called soy

He's sturdy, pleasant and gracious
And always wears a smile;
The kind of a gent who's ready
To walk that extra mile.

Fond is he of the open plains
And the corn that grows so tall,
The rivers and streams, the babbling brooks
The changing leaves of Fall.

Passingly clever at basketball
He plays with great finesse,
But despite heroic efforts
The team meet little success.

"Tis only another game", says he
We'll have another day
After the coach has had the time
To teach us how to play.

Always ready to come to the aid
Of the gals who live in Claver
He's greatly esteemed by the fairer sex
And easily wins their favor.

Who, we pray, is this clever lad
Without a single quirk?
He hails from Thomasboro
And his name is Joseph Burke.

THE CAVALIERS – IN MEMORIAM

Let's raise a cheer for Cavaliers

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To the college they've brought new fame
Not for the scores they have piled up
But for failure to win a game.

We love very much the cavaliers
In victory or in defeat
'Tis true we sign at their record
But admit that their performance is neat

As we see them so promptly respond
To the gentle pleas of their coach
We are rightly bound to admire them,
They deserve our praise not our reproach.

And so, for these brave lads and true
Let's please our admiration
Even though the season past
Was hardly a sensation.

CJOT

In the last years of his life, after he left Newman College, Fr. O'Toole was
aplain to the Brothers at Holy Cross School, New Orleans. His eye was still sharp
and he continued to describe the foibles of the men around him.....

SMOKE

Where will we find the proper place
For this smoke – free laboratory
Ah! There you have a problem
But that's another story

Why not preempt Cinema 2
A room both airy and ample
This daring move would afford
A striking clear example

To the whole community
And cut the Gordian knot
That would settle the problem once for all
This, my friend, I wot.

These verses now must have an end
With hopes for a smoke – free zone
Where the air both clear and wholesome
Will keep the body in perfect tone.

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The other end of the argument shows up in the following poem:

SMOKE

Brother Stephen loves his pipes:
He has a fine collection
From which as the spirit moves him
He makes a careful selection

And settles back in comfort
To enjoy a pleasant smoke
As he sips contentedly
A can of diet Coke.

He uses choice tobacco
Whose aroma fills the air
With sharp and pungent fragrance
That is passing rare.

Stephen puffs and puffs away
As the smoke ascends on high
While other Brothers in the room
To safer places hie.

\
Some worry about their lungs
Others have bronchitis.
Still others shun all smokers
For they're prone to tonsillitis.

I'm told there is a movement
To create a stereo section
Free from all contaminates
Or danger of infection.

Where one inhales the cleanest air-
No danger of pollution
For many monks this seems to be
The only real solution

To a thorny problem
Which bothers some Religious
And creates those situations
Where monks become Litigious.

Comment [FJVC11]:

Comment [FJVC12]:

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Next to smoking and the smoke, there is always the question of food. Fr. O'Toole has several poems about food.

PECAN PIE

The pecan season has arrived
And Howard's in his gloory
Who's to help him shell the nuts –
Well, that's another story.

Edward, of an evening, volunteers
With a sharp gleam in his eye
As he awaits that magic hour
When he'll dine on pecan pie.

Fisher, too, shows quite an interest
Altho he's on a diet
But when the tasty pie appears
Just watch him try it.

Others simply stand and watch
As Howard works away.
These, too, look forward
To that glorious day.

When pecans will be incorporate
In a tasty, luscious pie.
Then, my friends, observe
How busily the fork they ply
They're the ones who stood and watched
While others did the work
But when the pecan pie is served
You never see them shirk.

They're all so very eager
To join in celebration
When all they will contribute
Is their eager mastication.

But the shelling and the sorting
Has been left to others
Who worked their fingers to the bone
For smeeet – toothed Brothers.

Thus it is and always was

Comment [FJVC13]:

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And will forever be:
There'll be those who work and those who watch
From now to eternity.

My guess is that while he could and did make poems all his life, it was only in his years after he gave up administration that they were commonplace. At the same time I know if we went carefully through his correspondence with priests and friends we would find many more. I am sorry now that I did not do this. The ones we have here were all collected in a single file which he asked his provincial to destroy with the rest of his papers. We must all be glad they saved them.