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WILLA CATHER'S NEBRASKA PRIESTS AND DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

L. BRENT BOHLKE

When Willa Cather returned to the prairies of her childhood as a locale for her fiction in *O Pioneers!* in 1913, she returned to a number of other things as well. Among these were the religious faith and practice of her old neighbors and the importance of this faith to their lives. Cather's experience of rediscovery, struggle, and assimilation of the Christian faith is reflected throughout her Nebraska books and is particularly evident in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, written after she, along with her parents, had been confirmed into the Episcopal Church at Grace Church, Red Cloud. Although the novel is set in the American Southwest, it has many deep roots in the Nebraska of Cather's early years.

THE ARCHBISHOP IN THE NOVEL

In a lengthy letter to *Commonweal*, Willa Cather explained that *Death Comes for the*

Archbishop had developed gradually in her mind.¹ She and her biographers later supplied other accounts of the inspiration of the story, but a look at her uses of the Southwest in fiction supports the accuracy of the gradual process recorded in *Commonweal*. As Cather told her literary agent in spring 1926 while she was working on the novel itself, the central character was based on the pioneer bishop of New Mexico, Jean Lamy, who had arrived during the days of the buffalo and the Indian massacres and had lived to see New Mexico crossed by the Santa Fe Railroad.² In her fictional archbishop, Jean Marie Latour, Cather has given us an American saint. As Cather herself recognized, the novel has a "legendary atmosphere" that emerges from the portrayal of a life interpreted by faith.³ This quality is enhanced by the episodic nature of the work, which links it to traditional lives of the saints, and by the contrast between the flatness of the secondary characters and the complexity of the character of Jean Latour.

Cather's saint is a man who stands out among his fellow human beings, but he remains always fully and fallibly human. As D. H. Stewart has pointed out, Cather uses classical Christian theology, including the seven virtues,

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to sustain the image of saintliness that the archbishop projects.⁴ Faith, hope, charity, prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice are all practiced by the archbishop—although not in quite the orderly manner that Stewart suggests. Latour also has his sins, however. He is selfish in calling his friend Father Joseph back to Santa Fe.⁵ He is afflicted with *acedia*, that spiritual torpor which is the child of sloth (pp. 211, 225). Father Joseph's frequent absences bring anxiety and a fear of loss—both the offspring of covetousness. In his last few days the archbishop envies the early Christians their environment, for whatever they suffered, "it all happened in that safe little Mediterranean world, amid the old manners, the old landmarks. If they endured martyrdom, they died among their brethren, their relics were piously preserved, their names lived in the mouths of holy men" (p. 278).

The desire to have his name "live" points to Jean Marie Latour's besetting sin, pride:

Bishop Latour had one very keen worldly ambition: to build in Santa Fe a cathedral which would be worthy of a setting naturally beautiful. As he cherished this wish and meditated upon it, he came to feel that such a building might be a continuation of himself and his purpose, a physical body full of his aspirations after he had passed from the scene. (P. 175)

That ambition is quite different from the motivation of a cathedral builder whose name might be lost to succeeding generations. The bishop is aware of his own failings, and he acknowledges them, but they continue to shape his character. It is Latour's faults that make him a *true* saint, not like "the factory-made plaster images of his mission churches in Ohio" (p. 28).

THE NEBRASKA PRIESTS

By Cather's own account, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is based on the lives of the historical archbishop Jean Lamy and his friend and fellow pioneer, Father Joseph Machebeuf;

Mary-Ann Stouck has pointed out affinities with Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims in the population of the novel; and others have suggested different schemes. Beyond these influences, however, Willa Cather's success in creating a genuine American saint undoubtedly stemmed in part from her admiration and love for two pioneer Nebraska clergymen—the Right Reverend George Allen Beecher, who was Cather's bishop, and John Mallory Bates, the rector of Grace Church in Red Cloud and Cather's pastor. Cather's high regard for Bishop Beecher is shown in a letter she wrote to her childhood friend Carrie Miner Sherwood on the occasion of the bishop's twenty-fifth anniversary of consecration, the celebration of which she had missed. She had written a letter to be read at the anniversary, sent to the dean of the pro-cathedral in Hastings, but she also wanted to express her personal admiration. She said that she had met a great many bishops in her day, but none of them looked the part or was the part as much as her own Bishop Beecher. She was certain that Carrie and her own sister Elsie Cather both knew how much she loved him and how proud of him she was. She expressed the wish that one of them would tell him exactly how she felt, for she was always rather shy about communicating her admiration to those people she admired.⁶

The rigors of the early years of Bishop Beecher's ministry in the panhandle of Nebraska were not unlike those of the fictional Bishop Latour. Beecher's first charge was at Fort Sidney, and he traveled about by horse and buggy, holding services in homes of settlers or buildings borrowed for that purpose. His journeys usually took six to ten days and covered from two hundred to two hundred fifty miles.⁷ On one occasion, during a confirmation service, the congregation "heard a shot or two, but paid no particular attention to it as it was not an unusual occurrence."⁸ It turned out that a local merchant had killed a man. The incident is echoed in Cather's account of Bishop Latour's first Christmas in Santa Fe, when he and Father Joseph "were startled by a volley of rifle-shots and blood-curdling yells without" (p. 42).

Beecher was a longtime friend of Buffalo Bill Cody—as Latour was friendly with Kit Carson. As the bishop of western Nebraska, Beecher ministered to the Dakota Sioux and the Cheyennes; his sympathy for these Native Americans may be compared to Latour's appreciation of the Navajo and Pueblo peoples.⁹

Like Bishop Latour, Bishop Beecher built a cathedral for his district, which was under construction while Cather was writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Shortly after his consecration as bishop of Kearney, Beecher decided to move his residence and the seat of the diocese to Hastings. He approached St. Mark's congregation and asked to use their church, organized in the late nineteenth century, as his cathedral. The congregation readily agreed. The architect Ralph Adams Cram of Boston, who designed the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, was commissioned to plan a procathedral building. Construction began in 1919, and Bishop Beecher laid the cornerstone in 1922. Progress was slow until 1926, when additional gifts allowed the pace of construction to quicken. The first services were held in the new building in February 1929. Willa Cather was a regular subscriber to the *Western Nebraska Churchman*, the newspaper of the missionary district, which reported on the progress of the building throughout this time. The January 1925 issue carried the architect's drawing on its cover; and the November issue included a picture showing the extent of the construction. By October 1927, at the time *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was published, the building was progressing rapidly, as the cover of the November 1927 issue indicates.¹⁰

The building was consecrated, its \$150,000 cost entirely paid, on St. Andrew's Day, 30 November 1941. Willa Cather was not able to be present at that service, and she wrote Bishop Beecher of her extreme regret. She said she wished she could be in Hastings in the lovely new cathedral on St. Andrew's Day to kneel in joyful thanksgiving to heaven for her own bishop, the Right Reverend George Allen Beecher. She assured him that she would give

thanks for all that the bishop meant to her, to both her parents, and to so many of her friends.¹¹ Cather's letter gives some insight into her ability to portray her fictional bishop's complex emotional involvement with the cathedral he builds in Santa Fe. Until her death, Cather remained a loyal friend and regular correspondent of Bishop Beecher, always considering herself a devoted member of his flock.¹² Her letters to him express Cather's religious faith and devotion in a way that her other correspondence does not. Beecher conducted the burial services for both of Cather's parents and for two of her brothers, and he conducted the memorial service for Willa Cather at Grace Church in Red Cloud on All Souls' Day in November 1947.

John Mallory Bates, the other clergyman whose personality and history affected Cather greatly and helped inspire her portrayal of Archbishop Latour, was the rector of Grace Church in Red Cloud from 1903 until his retirement in 1920. That "retirement" was more theoretical than actual, as Bates continued to serve Grace Church until his death on 25 May 1930, at the age of 84.¹³ A friend of the Cather family almost from the time of his arrival in Red Cloud, Bates baptized Elsie, the youngest Cather daughter, and presented Willa Cather for confirmation, as he did her parents, her brother James, and Elsie. According to his granddaughter, Alice Bates Kline, Bates and Cather "were good friends in Red Cloud. It was after she left home that she came back and Grandfather gave her the instructions to present her for Confirmation. They had a mutual interest in many things besides the church. . . . I know that Miss Cather always sent Grandfather a first edition of her books."¹⁴

Bates was born in Connecticut in 1846. He took both a bachelor's and master's degree at Trinity College, Hartford, and studied for the priesthood at Berkeley Divinity School in Middletown. Ordained to the priesthood in 1877, Bates served parishes in Connecticut and Maine, and then felt called to be a missionary to the West. He came to Kansas in 1882 and to Nebraska in 1886. During his ministry on the plains

he received many calls to serve larger and more influential parishes in other parts of the country and was offered posts in educational institutions, but he chose to continue his work as a missionary.¹⁵

His physical appearance was impressive. According to Lewis H. Blackledge, a native of Red Cloud, Bates was

tall and spare, but not slight, of figure; a well-shaped head, prominent nose of the Roman type, a countenance rather grave but with a kindly expression, and an air of sincerity about whatever he did or said. One got the impression that in whatever he was engaged, whether it was play or work, enjoyment or endurance, his participation in it was genuine and sincere.¹⁶

If Blackledge's description is accurate, Cather may have been thinking about Bates when she first described Father Latour:

A young priest, at his devotions; and a priest in a thousand, one knew at a glance. His bowed head was not that of an ordinary man,—it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence. His brow was open, generous, reflective, his features handsome and somewhat severe. . . . Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth—brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners, even when he was alone in the desert, were distinguished. (P. 19)

Bates's lifetime of "taking" the church to isolated persons and communities in frontier Nebraska was the kind of career that Willa Cather admired. Blackledge described his adventures as he traveled about among his far-flung parishoners "to baptize their children, comfort the sick, bury the dead, marry those who were given in marriage. . . . They were all pioneers in those days,—he and those whom he served."¹⁷ One incident that occurred during Bates's tenure at Red Cloud was reported with the same quiet admiration and simple diction that Willa Cather might have used for her pioneer clergymen:

He was visiting friends in the country about four miles out of Riverton. There came a rainstorm so heavy that he could not be driven in so he determined to walk to Riverton and take the train to Red Cloud where he was due for church services. On arriving at Riverton he found the storm had been so heavy as to take out the railroad bridge over the stream there, and as there was no possibility of securing a conveyance, he set out to walk the remaining fifteen miles to Red Cloud, which he did, through the wreckage and debris of a flooded country, appearing for church service as usual. At that time he was seventy years old.¹⁸

A few years before the rector's death, Carrie Miner Sherwood and Willa Cather worked together to secure a stained glass window, still in place above the altar in Grace Church, in honor of Bates. Cather contributed a substantial amount toward installing the window, perhaps almost its entire cost.¹⁹ She was always proud of her priest, and according to his granddaughter, Bates "was forever proud of Willa Cather's accomplishments."²⁰

CONTINUING INFLUENCE

As James Woodress has said, "The more one examines this novel, the more echoes and reverberations and hidden art one finds in it."²¹ The reverberations of the influence of these two pioneer Nebraska churchmen continued to sound throughout Willa Cather's life. Her correspondence during her last years, when she was increasingly plagued by ill health, shows her relying more and more upon the Anglican faith she had embraced in 1922. When Cather sprained a tendon in her hand, she wrote to Bishop Beecher that it would allow her to attend church more often during Lent.²² At Christmas of 1943, she wrote him that the nearer we get to a world devoid of Christianity the more we are able to marvel at what that faith has accomplished for the world. Without Christianity, she believed, there was nothing save the "outer darkness" and the "wailing and

gnashing of teeth" spoken of in the Bible. For her there was only that one light of Christmas. Cather assured Bishop Beecher that, even though he had retired, he would always be *her* bishop—over all the other churchmen on earth.²³

Willa Cather had a unified view of the world and its creation. She saw everything as part of a whole, which is why she so easily interrelated the arts—writing the novel *The Professor's House* in sonata form, trying to achieve the same effect in fiction that had been achieved in a painting, and using other artistic media as inspiration for her creations. She was a sacramentalist who saw the entire world as a possible vehicle for the action of God in his creation. That sense of place which is expressed so well in her fiction was operating in her Christianity as well. Church buildings, the prairies, deserts, mesas, the Virginia woods, and the people who inhabited all those places became for her "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace," the classical Anglican definition of a sacrament, and that vision was expressed time and again in her writing. In that sense, there is a certain sacramental nature to her work itself.

Speaking at the memorial service of Willa Cather in Grace Church, Red Cloud, on All Souls' Day, 1947, Bishop Beecher said:

I have chosen for my text the eighth verse of the fifth chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, which is part of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

What thought could better express the life and character of Willa Cather than that expressed in this beatitude. To us who knew her, many from the days of her early childhood, her influence has been felt not only in the fascination of her literary productions, but in the simplicity and priceless beauty of her personality and Christian character.²⁴

Willa Cather's religious life had been one of pilgrimage—a quest that was consistently accompanied by discovery. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* she interwove her love and

admiration for her own priests and for the creed that they served with her fascination with the Southwest. She believed that the true tale of that area was in the stories of the French priests who were sent to serve the people of the region.²⁵ In drawing upon the qualities of her own Nebraska priests to portray the missionaries in her novel, she left the generations who follow her a legacy to enrich their own pilgrimages.

NOTES

1. Reprinted in *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 3–13.

2. Willa Cather to Paul Reynolds, 26 April 1926, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York. Cather's will prohibits quotation from any of her letters.

3. Inscription on presentation copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to Alice Roulhier, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

4. D. H. Stewart, "Cather's Mortal Comedy," *Queen's Quarterly* (Summer 1966): 145. See also Mary-Ann Stouck, "Chaucer's Pilgrims and Cather's Priests," *Colby Library Quarterly* 9 (1972): 531–37.

5. Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927; reprint, New York: Random House, 1971), p. 253. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

6. Willa Cather to Carrie Miner Sherwood, 25 November 1935, Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

7. George Allen Beecher, *A Bishop of the Great Plains* (Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1950), p. 19.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–18.

10. Walter Herbert Stowe, "Epilogue," in Beecher, *Bishop of the Plains*, p. 217. See also the *Western Nebraska Churchman*, 1919–1927.

11. Willa Cather to George Allen Beecher, 25 November 1941, Beecher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS), Lincoln.

12. Willa Cather to George Allen Beecher, 13 February 1934, Beecher Collection, NSHS.

13. Typescript copy of "John Mallory Bates: Class of 1872," *Trinity College Bulletin* (no date cited), p. 1. Beecher Collection, NSHS.

14. Alice Bates Kline to L. Brent Bohlke, 1 June 1976.

15. Lewis H. Blackledge, "In Memory of Rev. John Mallory Bates," paper delivered to the Southwest Nebraska Historical Society, McCook, Nebraska, 23 October 1930, pp. 1-2. Beecher Collection, NSHS.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

19. Willa Cather to Carrie Sherwood, 1928, and 21 January 1929. Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

20. Alice Bates Kline to L. Brent Bohlke, 14 June 1976.

21. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (1970; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Landmark Edition, 1982), p. 224.

22. Willa Cather to George Allen Beecher, 25 February 1941, Beecher Collection, NSHS.

23. Willa Cather to George Allen Beecher, 25 December 1943, Beecher Collection, NSHS.

24. Beecher, *Bishop of the Plains*, pp. 209-10.

25. Willa Cather to E. K. Brown, 7 October 1946, Newberry Library, Chicago.