

Laetare Medal Speech of Walker Percy (1989)

You know, in the part of the South I come from, there are not many Catholics. My wife didn't see a Catholic until she was nineteen. I knew a few more. My cousins in Atlanta, the Spaldings, were Catholic and we visited back and forth. By happy chance, their father, Jack Spalding, received this same award in 1928.

You might be interested in my first encounter with Notre Dame. It is one of my earliest recollections. I must have been five or six. My father was a great football fan. Every fall he would receive a batch of tickets to football games, like Alabama vs. Georgia, Ole Miss vs. Tennessee, Georgia vs. Auburn, Southern Cal vs.—and then came that strange name unlike all the others—Notre Dame. What is that? I asked. I don't recall any satisfactory explanation of what it meant.

Then came that movie, let me see, was it Pat O'Brien and Notre Dame? Something like that.

Later, in medical school in New York, two of my best friends were graduates of Notre Dame. One of them is here today, Dr. Frank Hardart, with his wife and daughter Tracy, who is a member of this graduating class. My two friends had the peculiar custom—at least it seemed peculiar in that medical school at that time—of going to church. Attending Mass they called it, every Sunday. I accepted it as yet another Yankee eccentricity and thought no more about it. Yet it stuck in my mind.

To make a long story quite short, years later I found myself a Catholic and a writer, writing novels and articles about science, philosophy, religion and such, and had long since discovered in my readings that this peculiar name referred to a community of scholars, a great university. Perhaps there are advantages to being an outsider. One gets too accustomed to names. At any rate I found it extremely touching that a university, a community of scholars, a great football team, should call itself quite simply and by the two lovely words, Our Lady. I still find it so, and it is one of the many reasons I am so pleased to be here.

The motto of the Laetare Medal is, I understand, *Magna est veritas et prevalebit*. I like to think it applies even to the humble vocation of the novelist. In my last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, I tried to show how, while truth should prevail, it is a disaster when only one kind of truth prevails at the expense of others. If only one kind of truth prevails, the technical and abstract truth of science, then nothing stands in the way of the demeaning of and destruction of human life for what appear to some to be reasonable short term goals. It is no accident, I think, that German science, great as it was, ended in the Holocaust. The novelist likes to irritate people by pointing this out. It is his pleasure and vocation to reveal, in his own allusive and indirect way, man's need of and his openings to truths other than scientific propositions. He is one of the lowliest handmaidens to the truth of the Good News, but if he, or any of us, succeeds even a bit in this task, then I say *laetare* indeed, let us rejoice.