

Father Vaillant and the Great Frontier

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April 15, 2019

English 203-07

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When one looks at the history of the American Frontier, they will undoubtedly find case after case of brutality and incivility between foreign groups. It wouldn't be unreasonable of one to assume that nearly everyone who lived in the centuries from Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas to the industrial revolution was immoral, and without any respect for their fellow human beings. On rare occasions however, one might run across an account of a compassionate, merciful individual from this period of turmoil. One such figure is Father Joseph Vaillant; the companion of the great archbishop, Jean Latour. Throughout his decades of missionary work in North America, Vaillant maintains a level of kindness and peace that was quite rare for the period.

In his physical description in *Death Comes For The Archbishop*, Vaillant isn't exactly flattered, as we are told that "the lord had made few uglier men." (Cather 37) It quickly becomes apparent, however, that whatever he lacks in physical appearance, he more than makes up for in his kindness and devotion to religion. Throughout Willa Cather's book, we see a man whose religious devotions outweigh nearly every other aspect of life. Vaillant is so focused on spreading his Catholic faith and fulfilling his role as priest, that he often overlooks simple things. Once, while preparing to travel to Denver for an indefinite amount of time, he even goes so far as to forget to say farewell to Bishop Latour, his lifelong friend, until seeing Latour's mood as he is about to leave. This tendency to overlook things isn't because of his carelessness; on the contrary it's simply a byproduct of his intense focus on other matters.

Later on in the book, the Bishop recolects on his younger days with Vaillant (they don't meet as children, but as young adults at the Montferrand Seminary), specifically describing times

when Vaillant had to take trips into the highlands due to a “nervous temperament.” (Cather 223) According to Latour, Vaillant suffered from this condition for his entire life, and he speculates that this was another reason for Vaillant’s unyielding devotion, not just to the church, but to everything he did. Latour continues in his recollections by telling us a story, originally told by Vaillant, in which the young man nearly joins the army as a result of attending a “military review.” (Cather 224) This story reflects Vaillant’s natural passion about everything he does, not only religious work. As a result of his constant reflections and speculations, Bishop Latour gives us a one-of-a-kind view into Father Vaillant’s life and personality.

We can see Vaillant’s devotion and purity more clearly when we put it in contrast with some of the other characters of the period. Take Francis Parkman, for example, as seen in his autobiographical adventure *The Oregon Trail*. Both Parkman and Vaillant are submerged in a foreign region, with strange people and customs, but their reactions to this new area are what sets them apart. Parkman isn’t a bad man, per say, but he is clearly lacking in many of Vaillant’s qualities. Perhaps the most outstanding of these is Parkman’s prejudice towards non-whites. He is never hesitant to compare native americans and blacks to animals, consistently describing members of the Ogillallah tribe that he lived with as “thorough savages.” (Parkman 171) Vaillant, on the other hand, is never quick to judge someone based on their race or culture. He recognises people's innate differences, but he doesn’t hold those differences against them. Perhaps this is why Vaillant is so fitting as a missionary priest. He understands that in order to gain the respect of another culture, you must first respect them.

Parkman and Vaillant aren’t total opposites, of course. Both men are very compassionate towards their friends and willing to go through the unimaginable in order to achieve their goals.

Parkman could almost be described as equally enduring as Vaillant, although he is less single-minded. Both characters are all too familiar with extended horseback travel and surviving in the wilderness for weeks, or even months. As a way of describing the hardships that a traveller must deal with, a passerby during Parkman's adventures once exclaims of the water quality, "Look here, you, it's chock full of animals!" (Parkman 55) There's no question that both Vaillant and Parkman suffered their fair share of hardship and exposure, yet neither of them seems to be scarred by their experiences.

Another character we might compare to Father Vaillant is Mary Rowlandson, as she is portrayed in *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Although she lived almost two centuries prior to Vaillant, her attachment to God and Christianity is nearly equal. Rowlandson never specifies which denomination of Christianity she follows, but judging by the fact that she is a British-American Colonist in the late 1600s, it is safe to assume that she is Protestant. Rowlandson and Vaillant may practice different sects of Christianity, but both are seen to be unwavering in their faith.

Rowlandson gives us an idea of the power that a devoted priest, such as Vaillant, can have by influencing people's lives. She isn't a part of the clergy herself, so her teachings in Christianity would have primarily come from a priest. Throughout her narrative, she constantly refers to God and the bible, through the good: "still the Lord went along with us, and provided graciously for us" (Rowlandson 48) the bad, praying: "that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men" (29) and the indifferent: "she found me sitting and reading my Bible." (25) This near-obsessive reference to her religion must be sparked by time spent in the church. If a British priest from the 1600s has the power to influence Rowlandson to such lengths,

then surely Father Vaillant has a similar power over the catholic followers that he encounters during his travels.

For a figure with so much apparent power over those around him, Father Vaillant is incredibly responsible. Throughout his travels, he makes it clear that he only wants to help the inhabitants of the places he visits. Never does he abuse his religious power or use it for personal gain. He relates the most selfish use of his power when he tells Bishop Latour, "I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life." (Cather 207) If the previous examples aren't sufficient, then surely Vaillant's responsibility and selflessness throughout decades in such a position of power should confirm his character.

Even in old age, Bishop Latour fondly recalls his earlier days with Joseph Vaillant. In the final pages of Cather's book (and the final days of the Bishop's life) he recalls one final example of Vaillant's devotion. As young men, when the pair were preparing to leave their families to work as western missionaries, Vaillant is torn between the oath he has made to the church and breaking his father's heart. He knows that there is no way to preserve one without breaking the other, exclaiming "What shall I do, Jean? Help me!" Ultimately, Vaillant leaves to work as a missionary with Latour, but he is nearly torn apart in trying to choose between these two devotions. In the end, only Latour can help him settle this internal dispute and be at peace with breaking his father's heart. (Cather 281-284)

Throughout these stories of adventure and turmoil, we often see a darker side of humanity, but it is important to remember that devoted selfless people have existed throughout almost all of history (and will continue to exist so long as mankind does). Throughout history, the worse side of humanity is often reflected in the most prominent figures - Columbus, Castro,

Hitler, etc. - and this leaves us feeling as if these figures represent all of humanity. We must keep in mind that, while cruelty and prejudice are parts of human nature, dedication and kindness are, too. Father Joseph Vaillant is a fantastic example of the better side of human nature and a welcome exception to the norm of prejudice, injustice, and brutality found throughout the history of the American Frontier.

Works Cited

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