

To any of you who remember Little Orphan Annie: “Arf!”

Rex Mottram (in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*) would do anything to marry Julia Flyte, the daughter of Lady Marchmain. Though a freethinker, he would even convert to the family’s Catholicism. So he began instructions under Fr. Mowbray. But his eagerness to accept everything without the least question worried the priest. Was he sincere or trying to get things over with so he could hasten the wedding? There would be moments when the priest would ask Rex what he meant by prayer and Rex would say, “I don’t mean anything. You tell me.” Then Fr. Mowbray would briefly explain prayer and Rex would say, “Right! So much for prayer. What’s the next thing?”

So Cordelia, the delightful younger sister of Julia, decided to have fun with her future brother-in-law. She began to share with Rex – outside his normal instructions – certain *other* items of Catholic belief. She informed him that Catholics slept with their feet pointed East because it was the direction of heaven, and if you were to die in the night you can walk there. She also told him of a Pope who made a horse a cardinal – and if you put a one pound note in the poor box with someone’s name on it, that person went straight to hell. Such teachings shook Rex’s resolve. I mean, creation, incarnation, trinity, resurrection, holy water – ok! But sleeping with your feet pointing East? Rex complained to Fr. Mowbray who later told Cordelia, “You’ve very considerably increased my work.” Cordelia, of course, was one of those still medieval souls whose universe was so saturated with God and angels and saints that she couldn’t resist toying with a modern agnostic like Rex.

Which reminds me of a joke. A fellow noticed a sign in a store window which said, “Talking Dog For Sale.” He entered and asked, “Where is this so-called talking dog?” The storekeeper said, “There he is.” The fellow approached the dog curiously and said, “Can you really talk?” The dog snapped back, “Of course I can talk! In fact the CIA once used me as a spy.” The fellow rushed back to the storekeeper and asked, “How much do you want for that dog?” The storekeeper casually replied, “What say we settle for ten dollars?” “Ten dollars!” cried the fellow in disbelief. “You’d sell that dog for only ten dollars?” The storekeeper looked a bit perplexed for a moment and then his eyes lit up and he said, “Oh! Come on now! Don’t tell me you believe that story about his being a spy. He tells that to everybody. He’s the biggest liar in town.”

Now I know one should never analyze a joke, but what’s really funny about that joke is the customer’s sudden realization that only *he* seems surprised by the reality of a talking dog. The storekeeper isn’t. He takes talking dogs for granted. He may not believe everything they say, but the fact that a dog can talk? Hey, what’s your problem?

Once people lived in an Age of Faith. Now we live in an Age where we’re taught to doubt anything that hasn’t been laboratory tested. Only thus can we escape illusion to live in a *factual* world. To which Cordelia might reply: “Only then will you experience a universe that has become a *vacant house*, as silent as a tomb. No talking dogs. But what’s worse, no talking God, no one speaking to us out of the past by way of the sun and moon and stars, no creative word calling us into the future and from within us. No Word made flesh. And therefore no sense of oneself as irreplaceable.” As St. Paul might say: “Be not intimidated then by the prevalent skepticism of this Age.” Rejoice that your faith places you on the opposite side of the counter from that poor, modern soul who would be startled to discover a talking dog – and even more so to discover a talking God.”

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