

A Few Words About Ivan Illich

Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.

—Ivan Illich, from a talk about missionaries delivered at the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects, St. Mary's Lake of the Woods Seminary, Niles, Illinois, April 20, 1968

I had not heard of Ivan Illich (1926-2002), an Austrian who converted to Catholicism and became a priest, until I read a volume of letters to and from Flannery O'Connor, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, published in 2019. Its editor, Benjamin B. Alexander, included correspondence between O'Connor and a friend, Rosyln Barnes, who became a missionary in Latin America. As a young woman, she joined the Papal Auxiliary Volunteer Corps for Latin America, a lay movement sanctioned by Pope John XXIII. In 1962, in preparation for time in the field, she went to Mexico for language studies at a teaching center in Cuernavaca. It was run by Illich.

O'Connor and Barnes had both attended college in Milledgeville, Georgia, O'Connor's hometown, and then both went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Like Illich, Barnes was a Catholic convert. "[O'Connor] was the one responsible for my conversion," she wrote in a letter to a mutual priest friend. [1] It was also O'Connor who recommended and counseled Barnes to take up missionary work, and was impressed by her joining Illich in Mexico, wanting to hear all about it through their correspondence, since Illich was by then a highly controversial figure in the church and elsewhere.

Illich had a perspective on missionaries that sounds very twenty-first century, except that he was espousing it long before its time. Like many, he was critical of "apostolic tourism." [2] But his views were much more radical than that. He had no patience with the superior attitudes of North Americans. He believed that the faithful of Latin America should not be expected to conform to the American values. Rather, he wanted missionaries to embrace the cultural values of the indigenous people they were trying to convert. [3] Some called him "anti-American," Alexander notes. "Some wanted him removed." Eventually the church essentially did that, by withdrawing funds from his center. He severed ties with Catholicism at that point and resigned from the priesthood. His idea that "the Catholic Church should dissolve its bureaucracy scarcely helped his standing with the Vatican," wrote Pearce Wright in *The Lancet* after Illich's death. [4]

Why there was an obituary at all in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, is easily explained. Illich had become notorious for his criticisms of modern medical practices, too. In his 1974 book, *Medical Nemesis*, he popularized the word iatrogenesis, meaning "disease induced by doctors." [5] And there was more: "In addition to his disquiet with organised religion," Wright wrote in his obit, "he argued that school made people dumb, and the legal system, rather than providing people with solutions, heightened their frustration. He argued that even science was being strangled by institutionalization." And there was more: "Illich scythed his way through numerous institutions he believed outmoded. He was a priest who thought there were too many priests, and a teacher of more than 50 years standing who maintained that children learnt best at home or in casual situations rather than through formal education. He also suggested that modern technology was oppressive, claiming, for example, that automobiles enslaved society and bicycles were a faster way to travel." [6]

Meanwhile, Barnes, after studies at Illich's center in Mexico, had been sent to Universidad Catolica del Norte, in Antofagasta, Chile. She disappeared there sometime after November 17, 1964 (the date of the last of her missives published in the *Uncollected Letters*) and was later presumed dead. [7]

1. Benjamin B. Alexander, ed., *Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends* (New York: Convergent Books/Crown, 2019), 336.

2. *Ibid.*, 243.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Pearce Wright, "Ivan Illich," *The Lancet*, Vol. 361, January 11, 2003, 185.
www.thelancet.com Retrieved July 20. 2022.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Alexander, 184.