

features



10 Rooted in Christ: Leadership for the Twenty-First Century

By Emily Stimpson

More than just successful professionals, Franciscan graduates are visionaries who recognize that to lead is to serve.

14 Dante, the Pope, and Me

By Dr. Regis Martin

The vision of God in *The Divine Comedy* is at the core of Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical.

16 Alumni March for Life

By Emily Stimpson

Graduates take to Pennsylvania Avenue, bringing new pro-life voices with them.

18 Extreme Makeover for J.C. Williams Center

By Tom Sofio

An expanded student center draws rave reviews.

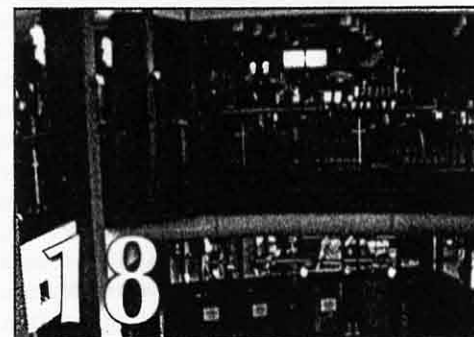
19 Filling Up, Fast

Last-minute enrollment for on-campus residents is a thing of the past, says Joel Recznik, dean of Enrollment Management.

28 Walker Percy and the Modern Malaise

By Emily Stimpson

An interview with English Professor Dr. Benjamin Alexander on the writings of novelist Walker Percy.



departments

- 4 From the President
- 5 Feature Photo
- 6 News Briefs
- 20 Class Notes
- 25 Alma Matters
- 26 Alumni Profile
- 27 Meet the Profs
- 30 Franciscan Saints

On the cover: Professor Don Materniak, chair, Accounting, Business Administration, and Economics Department: Alumni say their professors helped form them as strong leaders by their exceptional teaching abilities and personal witness of servant leadership. (Photo by Kevin Cooke)

Franciscan University admits qualified students of any race, color, national and ethnic origin, disability, and sex.



Franciscan Way Staff:

- Editor:
Lisa Ferguson '84
- Assistant Editor:
Tom Sofio
- Staff Writer:
Emily Stimpson
- Design Director/Production:
Brian Mick
- Design/Production:
Seth Harbaugh
- Class Notes:
Nancy Ross
- Photographers:
Emily Fogarty, David Sheehan

& Walker Percy the Modern Malaise

By Emily Stimpson

An interview
with Dr. Benjamin
B. Alexander

Modern man should be happy. Science and technology have provided him with wealth, health, and comfort that previous generations never imagined. "But something is wrong," wrote author Walker Percy. "He has settled everything except what it is to live as an individual. He still has to get through an ordinary Wednesday afternoon...What does this man do with the rest of the day? The rest of his life?"

That question, the problem of "the modern malaise," as he described it, runs through all of Walker Percy's books. Unlike most modern writers who wrestled with the problems of modernity, however, Percy saw more than just problems: He saw answers and hope in the teachings of the Catholic Church. A physician, philosopher, Catholic convert, and Southern man of letters, Percy firmly believed that only Catholicism offered modern man the cure for what ails him. His six novels and numerous essays make that case in a unique literary style and earned him a place among the great American writers and thinkers of the twentieth century.

Understanding Percy, however, is not always an easy task. Recently *Franciscan Way* sat down with Dr. Benjamin Alexander, professor of literature, humanities, and honors at Franciscan University and editor of a forthcoming collection of Percy's letters (*Good Things Out of Nazareth: Letters of Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor and Caroline Gordon*), to talk about the inherent challenges and rewards of reading Walker Percy's work, as well as his place in the American literary tradition.

FW: Walker Percy described himself as a "diagnostician of the modern malaise." What did he mean by that?

BA: Percy says to Catholics, and to believers in general, that you have to understand the disease of modernity to cure it. And that's what he attempts to do in his fiction. He writes about these detached,

dehumanized, isolated individuals, who are usually lapsed Catholics, and shows them systematically finding their way back to life via marriage, acts of charity, and sacramental participation in the Church. His characters are on a pilgrimage that ends in an affirmation of God. And that's where his fiction, which reads like existential fiction, departs from that tradition.

FW: Understanding existentialism is the key to understanding Percy's fiction isn't it?

BA: Without a doubt. You can't understand Percy's ironic humor unless you recognize he is writing in the tradition of Sartre and Camus, and you can't understand existentialism unless you understand that it came out of Nazi-occupied Paris. That philosophy—the idea that the world is abandoned of God and has no meaning—was born out of a historical experience. Some 85,000 Jews were abducted from Paris, one of the most sophisticated cities in the world. And almost no one said a word. With that kind of thing going on, the world looks absurd with a capital "A." And, ideologically, that's where many of Percy narrators are coming from. Ostensibly they look like their French counterparts. The difference is, in their search for meaning they don't rule out God. For example, *The Second Coming* is about a wealthy, lapsed Catholic named Will Barrett who is contemplating suicide. But what he does is find his way back to Christianity. Hence the title: *The Second Coming*. It refers to the second coming of Christ in his life.

FW: You don't see a lot of dramatic conversions in his novels though.

BA: No. *The Last Gentleman* ends in baptism, but the dominant thing is what I call incremental conversion. The sensational conversions are in Flannery O'Connor—at the point of a gun or through some kind of violent act. Percy's characters go in a progression, and you can almost, in some

of his fiction, miss the conversions. There are often no big changes, just moderate ones. But they are there. Again, it goes back to the idea of pilgrimage. Percy likened modern man to Robinson Crusoe, trying to find his way back to community. His books trace that journey.

FW: His Catholicism isn't often explicit in his fiction either, is it?

BA: Not the way that it is in O'Connor, no. Percy essentially said, "I'll leave the polemical, dogmatic, in-your-face Catholicism, to Flannery." He was trying to snag the secularized reader who had never given much thought to Catholicism, so he spoke in their voice. He sounded witty, ironic, worldly. He pushed the envelope with some language and talked and wrote about things that Flannery O'Connor never considered doing, nor experienced. The breadth of Percy's fiction is larger and more diffuse than hers. But, if you look at the overall texture of his work, they are all systematically conversion books.

FW: How did his Catholicism influence his writing?

BA: Well, first it gave him his theory of renewal. In one of his essays, he writes that the dispensation that held the Western world together has been shattered, and we're living in the bits and pieces of it. But then he echoes Romano Guardini who inspired *The Last Gentleman* and says just because Western Civilization is collapsing around us, we shouldn't give up hope. We should look for opportunities for renewal. So, the hope that permeates his novels and sets them apart from other existential novels is a direct result of his Catholicism. His sense of the dignity of the human person also came out of his Catholicism. Right when he was coming on the scene, human life issues entered public policy debates. He was staunchly pro-life and waged that battle as carefully and as closely as he could without

shrillness. His pro-life writing is some of the most succinct and powerful ever written, but also has the cool reasoning of a medical doctor.

FW: Paul Elie published a book a couple years back, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. It names Walker Percy—along with Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day—as one of the four most important American Catholic writers in the twentieth century. Why those four, and why Percy in particular?

BA: Because they changed the face of American literature. Without them American literature in the twentieth century would be unremittingly dismal, ruthless in its secularism, and atheistic existentialism would have gotten a free pass. Along with T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis, who were Anglo-Catholics, as well as William Faulkner, those four writers were part of a mid-century wave that is as important as the canonical writers of the nineteenth century—Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, etc. I would in fact label this as a second American Renaissance. It's a neo-Thomistic renaissance, rooted in what O'Connor calls apocalyptic Catholicism. Percy in particular is important because he went after the existentialists in their style—the French ones like Sartre and the American ones like Hemingway, whose fiction is pretty dark and melancholic. Without his participation in that second renaissance, I think twentieth-century American literature would simply have echoed what the existentialists said—that the world is abandoned by God and absurd. Percy met their challenge. All four of them did. They just had different artistic ways of doing it.

FW: If you were to recommend one of his books, for someone who has never read Percy before, which one would you recommend?

BA: I would actually suggest starting with his collection of essays, *Signposts in*



a Strange Land. They do a very good job of explaining his principles, and there is some wonderful cultural analysis in them, particularly on human life issues. His amusing article on "Bourbon" is a classic. He was a tremendously learned man, and I would rank his essays right up there with Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac, Romano Guardini, and Eric Voegelin. Also his essays on his "Uncle Will" who raised him are in there, and that helps give you an idea of the almost vanished ambience he grew up in as a scion of an old Southern family. Start with his essays, then go to *The Moviegoer*, his first published novel.

You also can't understand Percy unless you do some spadework, some reading of Flannery O'Connor. If you are Percy, you can't improve on O'Connor's achievement so he found his own voice. He doesn't take a back seat to O'Connor, but he was certainly looking to her. She kind of staked out the territory. It's hard to read him in isolation, because he's part of something else.

But he is wonderful—brilliant and tremendously witty. Anyone who can have a good time making fun of Jean-Paul Sartre and make the reader joyful at 3:23 on a grey afternoon in winter should be read. †