

Russell Kirk: An Integrated Man

The most obvious and important thing that must be said about Russell Kirk concerns the harmony that existed between his public and his private life. He was an integrated man who lived what he wrote. There were no disappointing disjunctions between the private and the public self. On the contrary, the happy domestic life at Piety Hill was a sort of extension of his written work, a lived parable which illuminated everything he wrote about the primacy of private life over public life, about the family as the essential human community, and about the basic loyalties to the villages, neighborhoods, and regions in which human beings were most likely to find fulfillment and a measure of happiness. The philosophy that he outlined in his many books and essays was embodied in his everyday life, and his everyday life provided a running commentary on the deeper meaning of that philosophy. Those who were privileged to be his friends were people whose understanding of his thought was only deepened by their knowledge of a life which made that thought even more real for them.

Nevertheless the underlying principle that unified Russell Kirk's life and work was not at first obvious. The harmony was clear, but the source of that harmony remained mysterious. At first, it might seem strange that his life and work were able to reconcile so many apparent contradictions.

Consider only a few of them. He was a critic of every sort of collectivist tyranny, but he was also a critic of unfettered consumerism. An advocate of the free market long before it was fashionable to be one, he was also a critic who constantly drew attention to the destructive power of a market which lacked a firm ethical basis. A patriot who rejoiced in the health and energy of American society, he was also a stern moralist who identified the pornographic popular culture of America as the most dangerous enemy of historic communities in every part of the Western world. A lover of liberty who distrusted every form of State interference, he disliked the libertarians and insisted on the need for, and the positive role of, both social and religious authority. The founder and spokesman for a political movement, he mocked political movements and systems. A conservative philosopher, he discouraged any attempt to construct a conservative ideology. A clear and cogent thinker, he trusted imagination more than discursive reason, insisting, for example, that there was more wisdom about the true nature of South American politics to be found in a single novel of Joseph Conrad (such as *Nostromo*) than could be found in a dozen heavy volumes written by the best historians, economists, and sociologists. Finally and most surprisingly, he was a

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profoundly religious man who seldom spoke or wrote about religious subjects.

The principle that reconciled these apparent contradictions is found in an idea which is difficult to describe in a few words. It is an idea which is expressed both as a doctrine and as a tradition, and it is most accurately described as the sacramental principle. This principle is to be found not only among Catholic Christians, but also among large numbers of Protestant believers. Certainly Dr. Kirk's life and work, both as an Anglican and as a Roman Catholic, was illuminated by a sacramental religious faith. It is not surprising that his cultural heroes and mentors were men such as T.S. Eliot and G.K. Chesterton, who also lived in the light of the same sacramental faith (even though they disagreed about the identity of the historical community which was the visible embodiment of sacramental authority).

Everything that seems puzzling about Russell Kirk's life and writing becomes clear once this underlying principle of unity is understood. Take, for example, the apparent contradiction between his defense of liberty and his insistence that the human heart and mind must conform to the truth set forth by true authority. In a society that celebrates "freedom of choice" as an essential human right, such a view must seem inexplicable. But for a sacramental thinker, there is no contradiction between liberty and obedience since he regards true freedom as ordered freedom; in Aristotelian language, human beings are social by nature and genuine freedom requires that they choose the means by which they can fulfill their nature.

Kirk's favorite Chesterton story was "The Yellow Bird," a short fiction in which

Chesterton satirizes false notions of freedom. In this story, an anarchist philosopher "liberates" a canary from its cage and a fish from its bowl: the creatures, of course, die once they are removed from the confining environment in which alone they are able to live. The meaning of the Chestertonian parable is obvious. The liberty of the radical individualist is destructive to the human person who can find happiness only in small and limited communities which may seem as imprisoning as a cage or a fish bowl.



The Kirks with their four young daughters in the Piety Hill drawing room (1976).

Learning to accept such limitations is the secret of a free and happy life. Like every traditional thinker from Dr. Johnson to Chesterton, Russell Kirk understood that such communities were the friends and not the enemies of human liberty—in Chesterton's phrase, they were not the prison of the human spirit: they were its only possible house of life.

It may seem odd to describe this communitarian idea as sacramental. Nevertheless, it is central to an understanding of the sacramental principle. In Christian terms, the sacramental tradition is essentially communitarian. Instead of the lonely individual who finds God by a series of utterly free choices, the sacramental think-

ers stress the way in which these free choices must be made in the context of a human community. But for them, these limited communities are much more than they appear to be. Just as Christ was an apparently limited human being who was also the presence of God on earth, so are the little human communities the way in which Christ is made present throughout human history: they are the places in which Christ continues the work which he began in an out-of-the-way province of the Roman empire; they are an extension of the Incarnation. Christ is the Sacrament of God, and the community is the Sacrament of Christ, the place and the means by which he is present in the world from which he seems to be absent.

This theological idea has important social and economic implications, and Kirk spent a lifetime mediating on their meaning. His preference for small-town life and for ordinary people, his distrust of vast impersonal systems, has a religious significance. Only in societies small enough for people to know each other as persons is it possible to catch a glimpse of the One who is most at home among ordinary people. The preservation and the renewal of small communities and neighborhoods is therefore important both as a human and as a religious work. For Kirk and for Chesterton, the community rather than the individual was of paramount importance. As Chesterton pointed out in *Orthodoxy*, the Trinitarian God is himself a community.

The sacramental principle also explains Russell Kirk's distrust of ideologies and utopian thinking of every kind. He regarded such systems as false and destructive of

human happiness precisely because they were constructed by isolated thinkers who were often alienated from the wise human communities in which they lived—proving the truth of Chesterton's sardonic comment that a modern book is usually written by the one mad person in the village. As a sacramental thinker, Kirk understood that truth was something to be discovered rather than invented and that it was most likely to be discovered in small communities such as



The Kirk ladies: Andrea, Felicia, Annette, Monica, and Cecilia (1994).

Mecosta, where people learned a healthy respect for stubborn objective realities which could not be easily manipulated or explained away. Throughout Kirk's writing, there are many references to the solipsistic quality of ideological thinking. He saw in this anti-sacramental spirit the defining characteristic of modernity. It was in opposition to it that one must view his passionate love for the trivialities of everyday life—a Christmas party, story-telling, leisurely conversations with old and new friends in his family home.

Nothing in the standardized and atomized units of the vast and disorderly urban world could be compared with these real things. Like Chesterton, he understood that these huge social systems were best understood as the projections of a madman's brain, cruel fantasies invented by isolated modern thinkers who saw themselves as

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creators of an alternative universe to the one created by God. In an early chapter of *Orthodoxy*, entitled significantly "The Maniac," Chesterton summarizes a good deal of what Russell Kirk was to say about this modern penchant for living in private, solipsistic worlds. In this passage, Chesterton addresses the modern ideologue and tries to persuade him that he would be happier once he stopped trying to be God: "So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world; but what a small world it must be! What a little heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God."

It is in this context of welcoming a complex and varied real world of material things, in preference to the insanely simplified and unreal world of the ideologue, that one must understand Russell Kirk's dislike of intellectual system-building. Notice, too, that his dislike extended even to the intellectual systems built by his friends on the American Right. As far as he was concerned, the life of the small and organic community was "larger" and more interesting than the mechanical life of modern industrialized society. Here again, his thinking was Chestertonian. Like Chesterton, he understood that those who step out of the family and village community are entering a smaller, more sectarian and less interesting world, no matter how large and powerful it may seem to be. For him, the modern revolt against the family is exactly what Chesterton said it was—a revolt against mankind. In *Heretics*, the young Chesterton expresses this key idea in the following words: "When we step into the family, by the act of being born, we do step into a world which is incalculable...in a world which could do without us, into a world that we have not made." The political implications of this homely truth are developed in a multitude of Kirk's books, but the vindication of the practical value of Ches-

terton's comment was demonstrated by the rich and fulfilling life that Russell Kirk lived in his family home and in his native village in an obscure but beautiful corner of the American Midwest.

To examine the deeper theological meaning of Kirk's thinking and living would require a treatise in mystical theology. Perhaps it is enough to note that all true mystics stress the fundamental sacramental truth



Russell Kirk tending to his property (1993).

that God is to be found in the humble realities of ordinary life. Russell Kirk understood this fundamental truth. It is clear that his life and thought represented a sustained and courageous effort both to defend and to revitalize the little communities that were the very basis of both national and individual greatness. He regarded such communities as little churches or schools of virtue; they were earthy and even earthly, but what they signified was something far more important than what they seemed to

be. In their very materiality, they were reassuring signs of the abiding presence of the Incarnate God who is found in the daily round of ordinary community life. No wonder that Kirk seldom spoke directly about God. The entire point of his sacramental faith is that one finds God in earthly realities; to see them rightly is to see Him. Kirk understood the truth that ever since the Incarnation, material things are luminous and transparent rather than opaque, because it is through them that one can sometimes catch a glimpse of God.

The sacramental principle also explains Russell Kirk's curious preference for imaginative writing. Although he had a deep respect for genuine scholarship, he also saw a special value in things that were concrete and specific instead of abstract and general. Here again there is a parallel with Chesterton. Kirk liked to repeat Chesterton's comment that it is unlikely that any truth can be told except in parables. Once again, the underlying and unifying principle is Incarnational: for Kirk, life is far more like a story than a puzzle. Consequently, it is wiser to trust the moral imagination, which expresses truth in the form of parables and allegories, than the discursive reason which constructs private logical systems of thought and substitutes empirical fact for mystery.

From this becomes clear the centrality of the apparently profane ghost stories, myths, and legends which delighted and enriched the life of Russell Kirk. They were humble earthly things that were written and read only in order to delight, but each of them was also a window through which it was possible to see a transcen-

dental world: they also were sacramental. But in an even deeper way, these products of the moral imagination drew attention to the ultimate sacramental truth. Like all sacramental thinkers, Russell Kirk understood the way in which such literature enables the Christian to understand the significance of his own life. After all, from a sacramental perspective, every human life is a re-enactment of the one Gospel story, and every human being is a character in a cosmic novel in which he writes his own tragic or happy ending.

The integrated quality of Russell Kirk's life and work was, therefore, derived from a truly deep religious source. The sacramental faith given to him in baptism incorporated him into a community of believers. Like the fountain of living water of which Christ speaks in St. John's Gospel, this faith was the secret source of the joy and cheerfulness which transformed and constantly renewed his own life and the life of all the many communities with which this remarkable man was associated. In an address he gave in 1984 on the occasion of his receiving the Ingersoll Prize for humane letters and scholarship, Kirk cited Edmund Burke's gloomy words about a world which seemed

to be dominated by "madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow." But he did not end his address on that gloomy note. Rather, he expressed his hope that order in society would be renewed and energized by a power which is eternal rather than temporal. That renewing force was at the center of his own life and was the secret of its integrity.



Kirk clowning around with his youngest daughter, Andrea (1980).