Nurturing Catholic Community

Curriculum Connections – Grade 12 English

Going to the Moon

Author: Nino Ricci

Nino Ricci tells the story of an Italian family who settle in Windsor, Ontario during the 1950s. He has an older brother. His parents work hard, his father in the Chrysler plant and in his carpentry workshop in the basement, and his mother as a cleaner or tobacco picker in the farms close to Windsor. His great uncle had settled in Windsor before the Second World War, and so all the other connections of the family had come to Canada and settled in Windsor. Across the river Detroit with its tall buildings assumed the status accorded to far off hills as “greener”.

Ricci describes the special status of the dining room in their house...how it was used only on very special occasions, how the furniture was heavy and special, how Pope John XXIII and President Kennedy were given pride of place there, and how Nino and his brother were forbidden from being in the room when their Mom was at work.

Nino describes his experience of rejection at school as a Grade student because of his ethnicity and his aura of poverty, he needed the protection of his brother, even though the latter resented doing that. However, he did find solace in the person of his Grade 1 teacher Miss Johnson who involved the class in an art project about the moon and the anticipation of the Apollo 1 trip into space. Miss Johnson engaged the class in such a way that the entire group of students really fell in love with her and her way of teaching. She had a more relaxed manner than the priests or nuns who taught in the school.

The balloon bursts on the imaginative trip to the moon when the Apollo crew die in a fiery accident at NASA. The author feels trapped on earth....unable to break out of the smallness of his world. Miss Johnson comforts him as he pours out his own sense of loneliness and grief.

The story ends with news of a cousin being killed in the war in Vietnam, and the two boys at evening time sitting outside and watching the smoke from the riots in Detroit in that summer drifting over the river.
Living in a Catholic community

Here again there is a story set in a Catholic context in a place that is not fictional. The school is Catholic; the iconic figures of Pope John XXIII and President Kennedy are Catholic. The family is from an Italian Catholic ethnic culture. Even though the boy experiences rejection because of his poverty and Italian culture, he does in fact inhabit a world that is stable and secure. His parents clearly love him very much. And there is a wider circle of uncles, aunts, cousins, and memories of the old country intact. He is in the presence of a gifted teacher...someone who gave her whole self to the task at hand, who cared a lot about her students, who was able to be herself.

There is no mention of parish life as such in this story, but there is a beautiful blend of the interaction of family and Catholic school as complementing each other. There is a fullness in home life offered in the faithfulness and work ethic of the parents and their deeply held values and convictions. But there is also an emptiness that is compensated for in fact by the school with its larger community and its imaginative teacher. Even though school life can be small and anxiety provoking when there is unkindness and discrimination, it can also be freeing and liberating when horizons are opened up that allow you to imagine yourself, your family and your world differently.
Resources


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Rogers, Carl R. On Becoming A Person. A therapist’s view of psychotherapy. 1961


Williams, Monty, SJ. Stepping into Mystery. Four Approaches to a Spiritual Life. Novalis Publishing Inc 2012

Echoes Fiction, Media, and Non-Fiction  Oxford University Press 2002

Websites:
Pope Francis Encyclical on the Environment  https://laudatosi.com/watch
St John XXIII Encyclical on Peace  http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html

Texts: Hamlet, A Doll’s House, The Wars, Araby
http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/
http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dollhouse/
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