

Emory unveils correspondence Flannery O'Connor

ATLANTA - Catholic author Flannery O'Connor and Elizabeth "Betty" Hester first began corresponding in 1955 when Ms. Hester wrote a letter to Ms. O'Connor commenting on her work.

Ms. Hester's initial letter was a comment that she thought the author's collection of short stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," were about God. Ms. O'Connor quickly responded, seeking more information about the stranger who understood her writing so well.

It was the beginning of a friendship that lasted nearly a decade, with the two exchanging written communication almost weekly until Ms. O'Connor's death from lupus in 1964 at age 39.

Ms. Hester donated the letters to Emory University in 1987 with a stipulation that they remain sealed for 20 years. Now, after two decades, the university unveiled the 274 letters to the public May 12.

Edited versions of some of the letters were published, with Ms. Hester referred to only as "A" in "The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor" in 1979, but this is the first time researchers will be able to view all the letters in their entirety.

Steve Ennis, director of Emory's manuscripts, archives and rare books collection, said that the late Sally Fitzgerald, who edited "The Habit of Being," was protective of Ms. O'Connor when choosing and editing the published letters. The entire collection, he said, will give Ms. O'Connor scholars a chance to see the author in a new way.

"There are 79 additional letters that have never seen the light of day," said Mr. Ennis, explaining that they were not revealed because Ms. Fitzgerald was very close to O'Connor and quite protective of her. "I think people are going to get a rather 'unglossed' view of O'Connor from these letters," he added.

Ms. Hester, who worked for the credit company that later became Equifax, was a reclusive woman, whose identity as one of Ms. O'Connor's confidants was not revealed until Hester's death in 1998. Many O'Connor scholars consider Ms. Hester the most important correspondent in O'Connor's life.

A Georgia native, Ms. O'Connor attended Georgia State College for Women (now Georgia College and State University) in Milledgeville and went on to earn a master's degree from the University of Iowa.

A parishioner of Sacred Heart Church in Milledgeville, Ms. O'Connor was a writer whose Catholicism had a strong influence on her work, which includes the novels "Wise Blood" and "The Violent Bear It Away."

On May 22, Woodruff Library and the Aquinas Center of Theology at Emory University will co-sponsor a dramatic reading of the O'Connor-Hester letters at Emory's Cannon Chapel.