

Cathedral on the Prairie

By **Joseph Bottum**

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Our friend, the North Dakota poet Tim Murphy, is safe—though the Red River flood drove him down to South Dakota to find a place to stay till the waters go down. He recently sent me this note about his drive south:

I am a severe student of the prairie, and much of my life I have driven to Pierre, South Dakota, on US Highways 12 or 212. Always I would see signs directing me to the town of Hoven and its Cathedral on the Prairie. Finally I succumbed to both curiosity and my return to the faith: My life had changed, so I took the turn. I spotted its spires from six miles away. From the south I have seen it at twelve miles.

I collect churches as others collect stamps, even during the terrible decades of my apostasy. But Chartres, Notre Dame, Il Duomo, nothing had prepared me for St. Anthony's in Hoven. I suppose it is because I have devoted so much of life to wresting money from the earth. I walked in, walked to the altar, fell to my knees and sang the *Tantum Ergo* of Thomas Aquinas and *Holy God We Praise Thy Name*. As Robert Louis Stevenson taught us, "Mankind was never so inspired as when it made a cathedral."



It is a church that seats only a thousand, and few of that thousand remain to fill it. I don't observe that mournfully. One man with our machinery can do the work that fifty men did when this church was built. The depopulation of the prairie was inevitable with the advance of technology. But with the late Richard Crutchfield, author of *Trees, Why Do You Wait?*, I fear for my country as our roots are torn from the soil.

Father Lance Oser wasn't to be found, and the rectory office was closed. So I went to the Ampride station and talked with an elderly man, a retired farmer. "Ya, da priest, he come farm to farm, an' he tol' my fadir e'ry tent' bushel o' wheat, e'ry tent' calf is God's."

In animal husbandry and dryland farming, ten percent of the gross is more than one hundred percent of the net. This was tithing reckoned at ten fold. The 1910s were a remarkable time for farming. Prices soared as World War I raged, and costs were miniscule by present standards. Some became unspeakably rich, but the people of Hoven, South Dakota, gave much of their winnings to God.

Never again shall I drive to Pierre without stopping at St. Anthony of Padua's Cathedral to pray. On my third journey I finally encountered the priest who holds it in his keeping. I wrote him a poem which has little to do with architect Anton Dohmen's masterpiece but much to do with South Dakota and my drive away from the flood.

Flight to Murdo

for Father Lance Oser

He fled the flooding Red
choking on ice and snow,
and just where did he go?
To a Best Western bed
four hundred miles away,
two thousand feet higher.
God knows, were he a flyer,
he would go there each day
just as the winter wheat
reclaims its tint of green—
a change of heart, of scene,
a refuge, a retreat.

He saw ten thousand geese
staging, the roadside pheasants.
Then begged a prairie presence,
"Grant that our birds increase."
He glassed a rolling reach
of cows the tourists pass.
Calf frisking in the grass,
he was renewed, but speech?
Let me just say the slope
of grassland where he parked,
each pasture that he marked
was crazed by antelope.

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