TO THE EDITOR OF *The Commonweal:*—You have asked me to give you a short account of how I happened to write *Death Comes for the Archbishop.*

When I first went into the Southwest some fifteen years ago, I stayed there for a considerable period of time. It was then much harder to get about than it is today. There were no automobile roads and no hotels off the main lines of railroad. One had to travel by wagon and carry a camp outfit. One travelled slowly, and had plenty of time for reflection. It was then very difficult to find anyone who would tell me anything about the country, or even about the roads. One of the most intelligent and inspiriting persons I found in my travels was a Belgian priest, Father Haltermann, who lived with his sister in the parsonage behind the beautiful old church at Santa Cruz, New Mexico, where he raised fancy poultry and sheep and had a wonderful vegetable and flower garden. He was a florid, full-bearded farmer priest, who drove about among his eighteen Indian missions with a spring wagon and a pair of mules. He knew a great deal about the country and the Indians and their traditions. He went home during the war to serve as chaplain in the French Army, and when I last heard of him he was an invalid.

The longer I stayed in the Southwest, the more I felt that the story of the Catholic Church in that country was the most interesting of all its stories. The old mission churches, even those which were abandoned and in ruins, had a moving reality about them; the hand-carved beams and joists, the utterly unconventional frescoes, the countless fanciful figures of saints, no two of them alike, seemed a direct expression of some very real and lively human feeling. They were all fresh, individual, first-hand. Almost every one of those many remote little adobe churches in the mountains or in the desert had something lovely that was its own. In lonely, sombre villages in the mountains the church decorations were sombre, the martyrdoms bloodier, the grief of the Virgin more agonized, the figure of Death more terrifying. In warm, gentle valleys everything about the churches was milder. I used to wish there were some written account of the old times when those churches were built; but I soon felt that no record of them could be as real as they are themselves. They are their own story, and it is foolish convention that we must have everything interpreted for us in written language. There are other ways of telling what one feels, and the people who built and decorated those many, many little churches found their way and left their message.

May I say here that within the last few years some of the newer priests down in that country have been taking away from those old churches their old homely images and decorations, which have a definite artistic and historic value, and replacing them by conventional, factory-made church furnishings from New York? It is a great pity. All Catholics will be sorry about it, I think, when it is too late,

when all those old paintings and images and carved doors that have so much feeling and individuality are gone—sold to some collector in New York or Chicago, where they mean nothing.

During the twelve years that followed my first year in New Mexico and Arizona I went back as often as I could, and the story of the Church and the Spanish Missionaries was always what most interested me; but I hadn't the most remote idea of trying to write about it. I was working on things of a very different nature, and any story of the Church in the Southwest was certainly the business of some Catholic writer, and not mine at all.

Meanwhile Archbishop Lamy, the first Bishop of New Mexico, had become a sort of invisible personal friend. I had heard a great many interesting stories about him from very old Mexicans and traders who still remembered him, and I never passed the life-size bronze of him which stands under a locust tree before the Cathedral in Santa Fé without wishing I could learn more about a pioneer churchman who looked so well-bred and distinguished. In his pictures one felt the same thing, something fearless and fine and very, very well-bred—something that spoke of race. What I felt curious about was the daily life of such a man in a crude frontier society.

Two years ago, in Santa Fé, that curiosity was gratified. I came upon a book printed years ago on a country press at Pueblo, Colorado: *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf*, by William Joseph Howlett, a priest who had worked with Father Machebeuf in Denver. The book is an admirable piece of work, revealing as much about Father Lamy as about Father Machebeuf, since the

two men were so closely associated from early youth. Father Howlett had gone to France and got his information about Father Machebeuf's youth direct from his sister, Philomene. She gave him her letters from Father Machebeuf, telling all the little details of his life in New Mexico, and Father Howlett inserted dozens of them, splendidly translated, into his biography. At last I found out what I wanted to know about how the country and the people of New Mexico seemed to those first missionary priests from France. Without these letters in Father Howlett's book to guide me, I would certainly never have dared to write my book. Of course, many of the incidents I used were experiences of my own, but in these letters I learned how experiences very similar to them affected Father Machebeuf and Father Lamy.

My book was a conjunction of the general and the particular, like most works of the imagination. I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève in my student days, I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition. In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance. The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it—but to touch and pass on. I felt that such writing would be a kind of discipline in these days when the "situation"

is made to count for so much in writing, when the general tendency is to force things up. In this kind of writing the mood is the thing—all the little figures and stories are mere improvisations that come out of it. What I got from Father Machebeuf's letters was the mood, the spirit in which they accepted the accidents and hardships of a desert country, the joyful energy that kept them going. To attempt to convey this hardihood of spirit one must use language a little stiff, a little formal, one must not be afraid of the old trite phraseology of the frontier. Some of those time-worn phrases I used as the note from the piano by which the violinist tunes his instrument. Not that there was much difficulty in keeping the pitch. I did not sit down to write the book until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get on with other things. The writing of it took only a few months, because the book had all been lived many times before it was written, and the happy mood in which I began it never paled. It was like going back and playing the early composers after a surfeit of modern music.

One friendly reviewer says that to write the book I soaked myself in Catholic lore; perhaps it would have been better if I had. But too much information often makes one pompous, and it's rather deadening. Some things I had to ask about. I had no notion of the manner in which a missionary from the new world would be received by the Pope, so I simply asked an old friend, Father Dennis Fitzgerald, the resident priest in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where my parents live. He was a student in Rome in his youth, so I asked him to tell me something about the procedure of a formal audience with the

Pope. There again I had to exercise self-restraint, for he told me such interesting things that I was strongly tempted to make Father Vaillant's audience stand out too much, to particularize it. Knowledge that one hasn't got first-hand is a dangerous thing for a writer, it comes too easily!

Writing this book (the title, by the way, which has caused a good deal of comment, was simply taken from Holbein's *Dance of Death*) was like a happy vacation from life, a return to childhood, to early memories. As a writer I had the satisfaction of working in a special genre which I had long wished to try. As a human being, I had the pleasure of paying an old debt of gratitude to the valiant men whose life and work had given me so many hours of pleasant reflection in far-away places where certain unavoidable accidents and physical discomforts gave me a feeling of close kinship with them. In the main, I followed the life story of the two Bishops very much as it was, though I used many of my own experiences, and some of my father's. In actual fact, of course, Bishop Lamy died first of the two friends, and it was Bishop Machebeuf who went to his funeral. Often have I heard from the old people how he broke down when he rose to speak and was unable to go on.

I am amused that so many of the reviews of this book begin with the statement: "This book is hard to classify." Then why bother? Many more assert vehemently that it is not a novel. Myself, I prefer to call it a narrative. In this case I think that term more appropriate. But a novel, it seems to me, is merely a work of imagination in which a writer tries to present the experiences and emotions of a

group of people by the light of his own. That is what he really does, whether his method is "objective" or "subjective."

I hope that I have told you what you wished to know about my book, and I remain,

Very sincerely yours,
Willa Cather