

## A Note from Father Patrick Curley

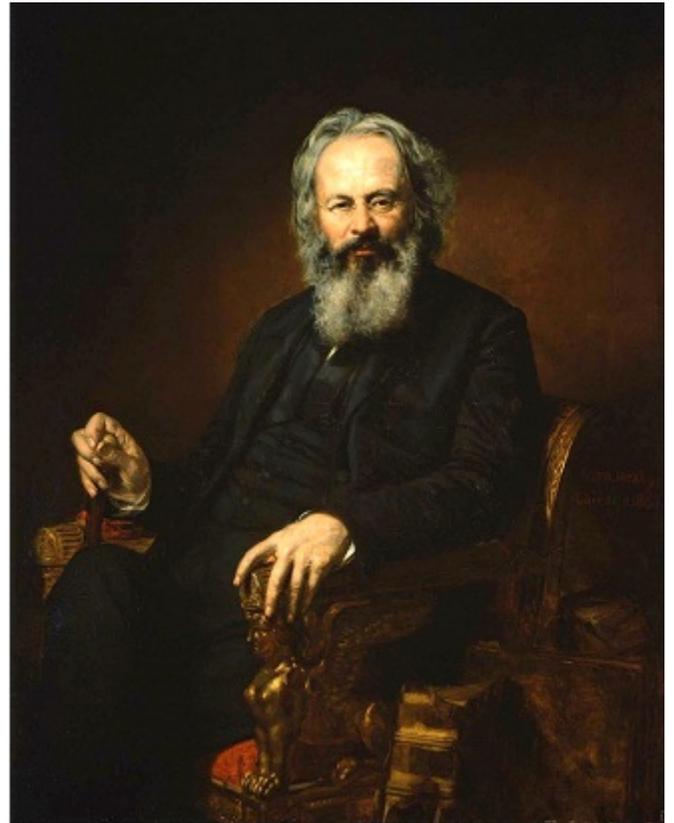
I'd like to say, "Thank you" for welcoming me to St. Peter's Parish. I'm enjoying the process of getting to know you. Fr. Garisto left me a gem of a parish. I'm excited about our future together.

I've been thinking about writing some sort of bulletin column. Since I enjoy reading, I've decided, for now, to share with you periodically ideas from the books I've been reading, so here goes.

I read, *The Conservative Mind*, by Russell Kirk, a Catholic convert. The book is considered by many to be the bible of modern conservative thought. In the book, Russell Kirk praises Orestes A. Brownson, also a Catholic convert. I knew Brownson's name from the seminary but not much else about him.

Brownson was a leading Catholic intellectual from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My interest piqued, I purchased the book, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*, by Patrick W. Carey. The book is about his life and literary works. A word of warning, I would not recommend this book. It's informative but dense. However, I'd like to share with you a little about his life and his political and religious thought. It might be of interest and the nerd inside me likes to share what I've learned.

Brownson lived from 1803 to 1876. He was raised Protestant, a Congregationalist, on a farm in Vermont. Brownson did not receive much schooling but he loved to read. I would describe him as a "truth seeker". His desire to find truth led him on an interesting journey. He passed through Presbyterianism; he became a Transcendentalist, a religious skeptic, a Universalist and eventually, a Catholic. On that journey, he began a family and was a Protestant minister. All along the road to Catholicism, he wrote articles and spoke publicly. I sensed he became Catholic because, while passing through all the Protestant communities with their various teachings and liturgies, he realized there must be one, true, universal Church, united and historical – a church that has preserved the apostolic teachings. He found that in Catholicism.



**Orestes A. Brownson, 1863**

As a Catholic, Brownson wrote about the religious and political issues of his day. For instance, he defended the infallibility of the pope in faith and morals. He caused a stir by suggesting that Hell was perhaps not forever for those in it. He suggested Hell might not be as bad as we imagine it. Eternal damnation seemed too severe of a penalty for a human person born with the stain of Original Sin. Also,

some people are born into unfortunate circumstances. Damnation did not seem consistent with the mercy of God. He speculated that those in Hell could grow in natural virtue but never experience supernatural love. Many Catholic bishops and theologians took him to task for his opinion. Politically, Brownson wrote on the constitution, government, slavery, succession, the Civil War and Reconstruction. Some of his views would undoubtedly be politically incorrect today, to put it mildly. However, he did eventually condemn slavery and press for its elimination in the South. This was a position which, at the time, placed him at odds with some in the US Episcopacy.

I found his views on states' rights and succession interesting. Essentially, his position was the states entered the Union united, not separately. He would say the states and the union itself are so comingled that you cannot simply separate one state from the union. Therefore, the states could not leave separately. He pointed out that we live in the United States, not the Confederacy of States. Also, he did object to the emerging 19<sup>th</sup> century trend of big centralized government. He thought it could lead to totalitarianism, which did happen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in some countries. He was a defender of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity. The principle holds that what can be done and managed at the local level should be. Furthermore, local customs and mores should be respected. Many modern conservative thinkers knowingly or unknowingly follow his beliefs.

What else can we learn from Brownson? A frequent criticism of Brownson was he was always changing his mind and positions. Recall, for example, his religious journey which was long and arduous. Brownson sought the truth, and therefore, God, which he found in Catholicism. He constantly questioned his beliefs. I think too many of us don't question enough how we view the world. I admire Brownson's effort to get it right.

Another criticism of Brownson was his manner of writing and speaking. He was a polemical writer. Therefore, he rubbed many people the wrong way. He turned off many Protestant and Catholic friends and foes alike with his convictions, convictions that a year later could be completely different. Later in his life, he would periodically acknowledge he was too abrasive in his younger years. He thought he had hurt some people's feelings so deeply that they wouldn't even give him or his opinions a chance after a while. For me, it was a reminder to speak with humility and charity. Many times we see things quite differently at 40 than we did at 25. We realize that life can be a little more complex than we thought.

Whatever Brownson's shortcomings may have been, he was a Catholic who sought the truth and who was willing to suffer intense criticism for his beliefs. He lost jobs for his beliefs, he lost friends for his beliefs and he sacrificed much for his beliefs. His immediate family became Catholic and he had sons that became priests. He was no wallflower. He got involved with the issues of his day. I think we can learn many positive things from his life and how he lived it.