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What Can post-Catholic Ireland Learn from France?

EAMON MAHER

IRISH CATHOLICISM has undergone a seismic diminution of prestige in the past few decades. The revelations starting with the news of Bishop Eamon Casey and Father Michael Cleary having unacknowledged sons, and on to the Ferns, the Ryan, and the Murphy Reports, have led to the situation where even the most fervent Catholics in Ireland have difficulty pledging loyalty to a Church whose leadership has engaged, and is still engaging, in cover-up and obfuscation.

The poet Theo Dorgan sees the Dublin/Murphy Report as a watershed in Irish Catholicism. In his view, something fundamental has changed in our republic as the Catholic Church's influence fades away without there being anything really to replace the role it has played for such a long time in promoting the ideals of justice, charity, compassion and mercy. He concludes: 'We would do well to begin thinking clearly, and very soon, about what we will choose for the moral foundations of a post-Catholic Ireland.'¹

This brings me to consider a figure who has huge relevance for the type of 'post-Catholic Ireland' of which Theo Dorgan writes. The French priest-writer Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), a *nom de plume* for Joseph Lemarchand, was born into a simple peasant family from Montauban, a small village in Brittany. His experience of growing up in Catholic Brittany in the 1920s was one where religious observance was taken seriously and the Church's authority was rarely if ever challenged. Having

1. Theo Dorgan, 'Scandals could undermine the church's foundations', in *The Irish Times*, 14 December 2009, p. 14.

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lost his father in the trenches during World War I, Sullivan then had to endure the pain of seeing his mother remarry in order to keep the family farm. He remained very close to 'petite mère', however, and her unflinching faith must have played a significant role in his vocation to the priesthood. In his memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, he describes her plan coming up to his First Communion to ensure he came first in the class for catechism. Not only did she make his reel off the answers, but also the explanations! He understood her motivation:

I can now see why mother was pushing me in this way. She wanted to enclose me in a world of habit, which for her was very close to the eternal plan. How could I be surprised by this attitude? The priests at this time tended to preach about laws and obligations. In this way they had succeeded in transforming Christianity into something approaching a natural religion. In their eyes the rural order in which the Church still played a dominant role was an expression of the divine will.²

Such an approach is very similar to the one that characterised rural Ireland during the 1940s and 50s, where the priests laid down the law and the people obeyed – or at least pretended to. John McGahern writes most compellingly of this in his classic essay, 'The Church and its Spire':

I was born into Catholicism as I might have been born into Buddhism or Protestantism or any of the other isms or sects, and brought up as a Roman Catholic in the infancy of this small state when the Church had almost total power: it was the dominating force of my whole upbringing, education and early working life.³

While he had difficulty with certain aspects of the Church's teaching, particularly injurious in its obsessive linking of sex to sin, McGahern nevertheless remained grateful to it for introducing him to cherished rites and rituals. He wrote, once more in 'The Church and its Spire':

Before the printed word, churches were described as the Bibles of

2. Jean Sullivan, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*. Translated by Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas, 2000), p. 52.

3. John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 133.

the poor, and they were my own Bible. I never found the church ceremonies tedious, and I miss them still.⁴

Although he lost his faith in early adulthood, the debt and the nostalgia remained. Like Sullivan, McGahern's mother was a devout Catholic and her dream was that he would one day become a priest. Sullivan's training in the seminary did not appeal to him at all. He and the other seminarians were constantly told they were the elect, the privileged ones. In a sense, this was true, but Sullivan found it difficult to hide his disdain for a reductionist approach to theology:

Far too few teachers know that you can excel in theology, in spiritual life, even in piety, and still have a heart that is completely hard. I have seen a lot of pious and clever men die at an advanced age, never having woken up to that reality.⁵

As he grew older, he found it more and more difficult to comprehend how the ideals of the founder of Christianity could have been distorted in such a drastic manner. He wrote in his provocative spiritual journal, *Morning Light*:

Brothers and sisters who meet together in truth – that's the Church. The rest is only a big, necessary apparatus which fulfils its function when it permits them to live in communion. The empire doesn't interest me. I accept the remains of empire provided that something is stirring inside it, the creative liberty of men and women wounded by the Gospel.⁶

CHURCH TRIUMPHANT

When one thinks back to the visit by the Irish bishops to Rome in February 2010, where they appeared on our television screens dressed in ecclesiastical robes in the sumptuous surrounds of the Vatican, bending to kiss the ring of Pope Benedict as he greeted them individually, one could be excused for calling into question their grasp of the cur-

4. *Love of the World*, p. 137.

5. *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, p. 56.

6. *Morning Light: the Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*. Translated by Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 6.

rent situation. After all, the reason for the visit was the repercussions caused by the negative reaction to the findings of the Murphy Report in Ireland and beyond. The survivors of clerical sex abuse must have felt intense anger at such insensitive behaviour.

I wonder how Jesus would have reacted to the revelations of the abuse by priests of innocent children? Would his first instinct have been the preservation of the institution, as it would appear the primary concern of the Irish hierarchy was? Or would he have immediately reached out to the wounded in a gesture of love and understanding? Clearly, he would have chosen the latter option. Nothing angers people so much as the knowledge that in their handling of the clerical abuse scandals, the Church leadership in Ireland has failed dismally to live up to the Christian teaching on truth and human justice. Worse still, elements within the leadership feel they are being vilified in an unjustified manner for their actions. They need to realise that they are not the victims.

GLORY IN HUMILIATION

The consequences of their poor management can be seen in the demoralisation of the priests, the vast majority of whom have done nothing wrong and who continue to work well in difficult circumstances in parishes around the country, the disillusionment of the faithful who see their certitudes reduced to dust, and the ammunition provided to the anti-clerical lobby to flog what is becoming increasingly a dead horse, the institutional Church.

Sullivan would have seen the 'crisis' the Irish Church is currently enduring as a unique opportunity. Speaking about the French Church of the 1970s, he wrote:

Like the storm clouds of the exodus, the Church's face is more luminous now than when it seemed to rule. It has found glory in its humiliation.⁷

This, to me, is what the Irish Church must now strive to do; find 'glory in its humiliation.' It is no simple task, I know, but we have to recognise that the situation in which we now find ourselves calls for a rediscovery

7. *Morning Light*, p. 149.

of the essence of Christianity. Sullivan offered the following template:

I see the Church detaching its members from structures of profit, conventional security, and mythologies of happiness in order to make them spiritual nomads, capable of commitment without illusion, always ready to absent themselves in order to go somewhere else, straining for the impossible and necessary.⁸

GOSPEL OR CHURCH?

It took quite a considerable amount of time for Sullivan to become aware that the Gospel message is one of movement and uprooting, of risk-taking, of commitment to the poor and the marginalized. After ordination in 1938, he was appointed to a Catholic *lycée* (secondary school) in Rennes, where he would later also work as chaplain to the university. He set up a cinéclub and cultural centre which attracted some of the most famous filmmakers, writers and theologians to the Breton capital.

All the while a literary vocation was taking root, but his first novel, *Le Voyage intérieur*, did not appear until 1958. He was fortunate in securing the support of his archbishop, Emile Roques, who allowed him freedom from pastoral duties to pursue the unusual vocation of priest-writer.

I often wonder if the kindly cardinal subsequently regretted this decision, as Sullivan never saw himself as being an apologist for the Catholic Church. He did receive the *Grand Prix catholique de littérature* for his third novel, *Mais il y a la mer* (*The Sea Remains*), an award he accepted in large part in order to alleviate the anxiety of his mother, who could not understand why there was no mention of her son's writing in the Catholic press. So, although he was uncomfortable at being so closely identified with the Catholic establishment, Sullivan went along with what he saw as a charade mainly because he knew there would be positive things written about him in the main Catholic newspaper, *La Croix*, which would please his mother. Afterwards, however, he felt like an impostor:

You describe a cardinal who turns his back on his exalted position

8. *Morning Light*, p. 158.

within the Church to follow a more humble path. And you, the writer who brought this cardinal to life, you dare to show yourself thus in public, to lap up all this praise!⁹

I have always felt that Sullivan's reaction to the prize was excessive. After all, the novel does not in any way present an edifying picture of the Church. The main character, Cardinal Ramon Rimaz, after devoting years to getting to the top of the ecclesiastical ladder, suddenly sees that his career has been a betrayal of his original vocation. He speaks of the 'petrification' of his soul that came about through his attachment to wearing the 'ceremonial mask'. Having retired to a villa beside the sea, he resolves to rekindle the faith of his childhood, a process that at the end of the novel will lead to his decision to take the place of a political prisoner who escapes by exchanging clothes with the cardinal during one of the latter's visits to his cell.

This symbolic gesture will bring down on Rimaz the disdain of the social and religious authorities whose favour he had always sought throughout his career. The narrator observes:

Because now that everything had been acted out, now that Ramon had done this admirable and foolish thing, performed this act, perhaps the last of his life, it all took on a different light. A life could be illuminated by a single act at its close, he said, a single act that changed the meaning of all the rest.¹⁰

FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE WORLD

Sullivan was intrigued by characters who rebelled against the status quo, who at a certain point in their lives chose precariousness over security, God over Mammon, the margins over the centre. Ramon Rimaz is a good example of the type of Christian witness favoured by Sullivan, as he is someone who understands that the Gospel demands that we be 'poor in spirit', that we live the Christian message of love in an authentic manner: 'To his endless amazement, by discovering the world he [Cardinal Rimaz] entered into the understanding of the

9. *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, p. 87.

10. *The Sea Remains*. Translated by Robert A. Donahue Jr. and Joseph Cunneen (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 23

gospel.¹¹ Far too often, our lives are spent flitting from one ambition to the next: the well-paid job, comfortable home, social status. We fail to see that such things count for nothing in the end.

Sullivan's characters, many of whom were based on people he met in real life, turn their backs on the superficial, the material, the futile, in order to seek out a more meaningful existence on the margins. He explained this decision in the following manner:

In what people call my novels, the leading roles went to people who had been wounded by life. Rejected by the world, they bore obscurely within themselves societies that were yet to be born. Without knowing or wishing it, they spontaneously isolated themselves from mind-sets and structures that sacrificed individuals to growth, money, the future, or to the image of happiness coming from the outside and that was even more alienating than the eternal happiness of cemeteries which have lulled so many believers to sleep.¹²

The trajectory of his characters reflects Sullivan's own personal experience. He too was 'wounded by life', felt stifled when confined to a traditional ministry, alienated by the way the Church was detaching itself from the ideals of its founder.

There are also oblique references in his work to at least one painful relationship with a woman. It is unlikely that he could have ever been comfortable being with someone else on a constant basis; his restless character was always anxious to seek out new places, to discover fresh experiences. Literature became his way of living out his vocation. While he did not go so far as to follow his characters to the edges of society – he speaks of tramps, prostitutes, people with psychological problems, priests who choose the most downtrodden communities as the location where they can best bring hope and healing – he managed to perform a more worthwhile task by describing the change that takes hold of them once they have freed themselves of the burden of respectability and come to see that the real purpose of experience is knowledge of self, of others and of the divine. We read in *Morning Light*:

11. *The Sea Remains*, p. 81.

12. *Morning Light*, p. 37.

My personal journal is mixed in with my books. My preference would be to speak neither about faith nor about myself, but of men and women who set out against the night, of highways and skyscrapers, of the rejects of society, of love, its wounds and cures, in the secret hope that the absolute would offer a sign in spite of me.¹³

Fraternity, communal life, authenticity, interior illumination, rebirth, this is the type of vocabulary Sullivan employs to capture what happens to his characters. It may seem that he was endeavouring to change the structures of society, denounce inequality, but that is far from what he sought. For Sullivan, marginality does not impoverish but rather enriches those who embrace it, by helping them to comprehend that their present life is without meaning. One day they begin to live, to look around them, to truly 'see' for the first time.

Some thirty years ago, in February 1980, Jean Sullivan was the victim of a hit-and-run accident as he emerged from his daily walk in the Bois de Boulogne. He died a few days later without ever regaining consciousness.

NEW BIRTH

When I re-read his books now, I am struck by prescient manner in which he described the Western world sliding down the slippery slope of consumerism, with the Church in tow. At a time when Ireland is contemplating a scenario whereby the Catholic Church could well become a minority concern, where not a day passes without some additional revelation of clerical wrongdoing in Ireland or elsewhere in the world, there is a genuine need for the type of spiritual witness which Sullivan provides. He too reached a crossroads and came to the painful realisation that when life breaks you, it is not the comfortable image of God we have constructed for ourselves that we seek, but that of the suffering Jesus Christ who chose to live and die among us.

So, instead of giving in to despair, perhaps we should look to the possibilities that the current situation provides. A crossroads offers choice of direction, a chance to effect change. We could profitably share in Sullivan's vision when he wrote:

13. *Morning Light*, p. 9.

In the future, awaiting birth even though it has been born for thousands of years, there is the new Christian order, more humble and more truthful than what has gone before.¹⁴

This is the sort of thought that might sustain us on the difficult path ahead.

14. *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, p. 57.



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