

1993-3

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Recommended Citation

Maher, E., "Faith on the Margins: the Example of Jean Sullivan", *Doctrine and Life*, Vol. 43, No.3, pp. 147 - 155, March 1993.

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Faith on the Margins: the Example of Jean Sullivan

EAMON MAHER

John Macken's article – 'The Climate for Belief at the End of the 90s' – in the November 1992 edition of *DOCTRINE & LIFE*, outlined certain characteristics of contemporary belief as we approach the end of the second millennium. Fr Macken described how the Church is being forced to speak more and more from the edge of society, rather than from its centre. Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), a French writer-priest who is beginning to come to our attention in Ireland through the appearance of some of his works in translation, had the prophetic vision to anticipate these changes. He criticised the Church of the West for its neglect of those to whom Christ was always most attached, the poor and the needy. He wrote about triumphalism, intellectual elitism, the preoccupation with artificial adherence within the institution.

At the time – the 60s and 70s in France – his words were often met with the kind of scepticism and disbelief which are, more often than not, the lot of the prophet in his own era. It is only now, in a period when the Church is being obliged by external and internal forces to leave behind its imperialistic ambitions and to re-discover the humility and love of justice of the early Church, that readers are beginning to appreciate the validity of Sullivan's testimony. In *Morning Light (Matinales)*, Gallimard, 1976) he announced the type of changes in the Church which, revolutionary though they seemed almost two decades ago, have come to be more generally acceptable today:

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.¹

Spiritual liberty, a keen sense of social justice, love, commitment to the poor, ecumenism – these are the aspirations of the Church of our day which has begun to rediscover the humility of

1. *Morning Light*, Paulist Press, New York, 1988, p. 158.

its origins. Rather than upholding power and privilege, it is beginning to speak out unequivocally against the exploitation of the poor, greedy attachment to material wealth, the abandonment of spiritual concerns in favour of secular gods like sex, political expediency and self-gratification. In adapting this more radical stance in the social sphere, the Church is moving towards the periphery, the margins of contemporary society. It is taking a risk. For Sullivan, spiritual life is all about taking risks, it's about exiling self from all security and putting self to the test. He would be therefore pleased to see so many priests today intimately involved with weak and oppressed victims, not just in South America, where the wave of liberation theology has been most keenly felt, but in most countries of the Western world.

CLOSE TO THE MARGINALIZED

Communism no longer poses a threat to Christianity. The new enemy is spiritual indifference. The latter is a far more difficult obstacle to surmount. All significant change, according to Sullivan, comes from within. In order therefore to capture and hold the interest and attention of the spiritually indifferent, it is necessary, he maintains, that the Church provide dynamic witnesses to faith. The institution is in need of people whose spiritual example transcends and transforms the lives of those who come in contact with them. Such individuals are rare indeed but Sullivan's novels provide us with a few examples of people who live out a muscular faith, a faith which of necessity has to be a marginal option in a period dominated by material and secular interests. His main characters are generally marginal figures also because it is they who have the best opportunity of living out the Christian message in an authentic manner:

From the start I feel close to all those whom society has marginalized – tramps, addicts, freaks, even 'establishment' types, empty of spiritual substance and beginning to realize it. They live in the midst of steel, glass high-rises, highways that have become cemeteries, sex-shops, and the rubble of human failure. But at the same time I notice with amazement that a song of freedom flows through everything, a paradoxical joy more powerful than my pain and mediocrity, the hope which those who bear it within them say they recognise. (p. 100)

I am going to concentrate on two novels by Sullivan: *The Sea Remains* (*Mais il y a la Mer*, Gallimard, 1964) and *Eternity My Beloved* (*Car je l'aime ô Éternité*, Gallimard, 1966). These provide us with two marginal characters of a very different nature. The fact that they happen to be a cardinal and a priest says something essential about Sullivan's thinking. Here are two men who traditionally would have been placed in the centre of society. Instead, for reasons I will be analysing, they end up on the margins, in a situation where the rebellious and uncompromising nature of their faith is given a freer rein.

TAKING STOCK

Cardinal Ramon Rimaz, the hero of *The Sea Remains*, during his ecclesiastical career, loses touch with his vocation. As a member of the social and ecclesiastical hierarchy he spends many years courting the good favour of the political leaders of his country, looking after the day-to-day administration of the local Church. In the process he forgets the interior life. Being the centre of attention, he fails to think of those people whom the institution is neglecting – the poor, the sinners, the rebels. Then one day he hears some of his staff discussing him. 'He's gone past it,' they say. 'He's slowing down. He no longer has his finger on the pulse.' These comments awaken him. He retires to a villa beside the sea, to take stock of his life, to prepare for death. The appraisal of his 'glorious' past reveals many faults. He realises that he was less than understanding of those whom he perceived to be 'outside' the Church:

In the time of his glory, Ramon Rimaz had not thought for one instant of the indifference and hostility of other crowds, beyond the narrow fringe of the devout. They were just the mass of anticlericals, unbelievers, communists, poor sinners; we should pray for them, try to convince them by improving our methods of communication, and prevent them from doing harm by using the prestige and social power that Providence ...²

The 'Prince' of the Church, in falling for his own propaganda, in refusing to enter into dialogue with the perceived enemies of the institution, in relegating them to an inferior position on the spiritual plane, was 'playing his role' too successfully. He was, in fact, ignoring the essence of Christianity, which is built around

2. *The Sea Remains*, Crossroad, New York, 1989, p. 14.

love and understanding of all our fellow humans. The scales are slowly being removed from the cardinal's eyes, however, and he is starting to see himself as he is. Memories flood into his consciousness as he flicks through newspaper cuttings describing the main events of his career. It all reads like a list of ceremonies devoid of spiritual significance. Far too often he is captured posing for pictures in the company of politicians and local dignitaries. Why had he not rebelled? How could he have succumbed to all these performances? The narrator gives us an idea of things to come when he says:

Shout Ramon, cry out! I tried to imagine him, rising to his full height, swollen with anger, suppressing the words: that Christianity was at the service of no state, of no country, but was first of all at the service of liberty and the salvation of the living. (*The Sea Remains*, p. 31)

The 'rebel' is slow to rebel. When he finally does it is not through a spectacular sacrifice designed to attract public attention. The cardinal has had enough of political intrigue, of shows and spectacles. He merely wants to atone for past failings and to demonstrate one last time his commitment to the poor and the victimised. The 'Prince' becomes the victim by exchanging his ecclesiastical robes for the clothes of Monolo, a political prisoner and a friend of Minka. The latter is a female painter and a Yugoslav immigrant who has been subjected to the most heinous physical and mental torture, and yet she remains true to an undeniable Christian ethos: 'Sometimes,' she says, 'It seems to me that I am with Him, even in my sins, because I'm waiting for justice.' (p. 96)

NO LONGER MASKED

Unknowingly she illuminates the path which Rimaz will follow. To know the truth of the Gospel message it is necessary for him to experience at first-hand the plight of the oppressed; he will have to suffer alienation and disdain, carry the Cross, place himself on the margins. In the end he does so joyfully. Prior to his imprisonment, the sermons he gave in the village of Altata betrayed something of the anguish of a man whose world has been turned upside-down: 'He stumbled over his words: long silences punctuated his meditation. But the silence spoke: because you had the sense of a presence, that he was struggling with and against someone.' (p. 99)

And then the words begin to flow, a man begins to speak his truth, without a care for public opinion and conventions, driven on by the fire of his conviction:

But little by little, he said, he had come to think that the social power of the Church could be the cause of its spiritual weakness, just as a mass membership could go hand in hand with profound alienation. The Church itself ought to be poor and humble, without waiting to be crucified. (p. 100)

The strength of the Church is in its humility. When it is weak, it is strong. This is the realisation which comes to the cardinal as he approaches death. He determines to choose his Golgotha. One other significant event strengthens him in his resolve. Every year, in Altata, the locals performed a re-enactment of the Passion. On the occasion of Rimaz's attendance at the ceremony, the local dignitary, Jesu Gonzalez, decided to 'negotiate the privilege of carrying the cross, in order to liquidate, once and for all, the anxiety he felt about his salvation, all the while continuing to live as lord and master.' (p. 112) He wore a mask, as was traditional. However, news of the identity of the Christ was leaked and the Passion was lived out in reality. The shouts of hatred and the derisive laughter were no longer part of a role but the expression of genuine hatred and mockery. The temporal leader is slain as he carries the cross. The ecclesiastical leader looks on, horrified, and realises that a follower of Christ must not be 'lord and master', but that he must live poor in spirit as well as in possessions.

Power and all the prestige that accompanied it – Jesus had crucified them. How could those who had governed in his name have been able to act like princes, to cover themselves with all those emblems of glory that had been flouted once and for all, that had become the privilege of the world? (p. 110)

By placing himself among prisoners, a group of people who have been marginalized by society and for whom the cardinal has had very little time during his 'reign', Rimaz rediscovers his original faith. Removed from the support of secular and ecclesiastical powers, he knows happiness because he is once more humble in spirit, poor in reality. Incidentally, we do not meet him in prison so we do not know how long his happiness survived there. The Cross involves continuous abandonment.

TOTAL SACRIFICE

With Strozzi, the hero of *Eternity My Beloved*, we meet a priest who is very much the ideal witness to faith in the Sullivan mode: 'He lives what I just talk about.'³

Sullivan stops short of living among the poor, the downtrodden, those on the margins. His vocation is a different one. He will write about them. He will extol their greatness, their ability to endure physical and mental anguish, their fraternity, their lack of pride.

In Strozzi he found the model hero, the recurring figure of his novels. I should point out that Strozzi actually lived and that Sullivan knew him. His name was Auguste Rossi, a priest who began ministering to the prostitutes of Pigalle during the Second World War and who remained among them until his death several years later. Here was a man who chose to live among a marginalized group of women. He shared their joys and sorrows, he loved them, he gave them back some self-esteem, he helped them to live. He had no need to talk to them about Christ: he was living out the message of the Gospel. The 'ladies of the night' appreciated his companionship. One of them, Paquerette, explains how he was 'the first man who had ever looked on her as a human being ... Everything starts probably from this point: self-respect becomes possible again.' (*Eternity My Beloved*, p. 35)

Elizabeth, another prostitute, realises the important role Strozzi has played in their lives: 'She'd heard the other girls talk about him. They teased him, they laughed at him, but in a nice way ... ; somehow he seemed to give them the courage to go on living.' (p. 63)

Strozzi's was the total sacrifice. Deprived of all financial support from his order because of suspicions regarding his work in the 'milieu', he is forced to rely exclusively on the gifts of his 'parishioners' and friends. His choice mirrors that of the 'worker priests' who were beginning to emerge from the Mission de France at this time. Priests and believers alike were tired of pious phrases. They wanted to do something positive to help the less well-off members of society. But there were prejudices to be overcome, preconceived opinions to be thwarted. The cardinal who interviews Strozzi prior to his expulsion is torn between anger and admiration: 'Who is this Strozzi? A saint, a crank, a poor wretch

3. *Eternity My Beloved*, mss., p. 99. My references will be taken from Sister Eileen Riordan's unpublished translation of *Car je t'aime ô Éternité*.

who needs the scum of society to help him breathe easily, a prophet? If only I had a whole bunch like him but what can I do with just one?' (p. 82)

The cardinal's reaction is typical of a group of administrators in the French Church around this time. Priests like Strozzi and those who stood side-by-side with their fellow workers in the factories of France, incited the fear and incomprehension of more conventional clerics and lay people. Was everyone supposed to strip himself of worldly goods and live among the poor? Not everybody was equipped or willing to carry Christ's example to its logical conclusion. Strozzi had things pushed on him in a sense when he was expelled from his order at the age of sixty three. After this there was no turning back. He was not without anxiety:

You think you're on the side of the poor, that you love them, that you love poverty – as if vague feelings were the same as actions ... It is only then, he said, that he believed he had come to experience humiliation in his flesh and blood. Up until that time he had only thought he understood. (p. 83)

Some consolation must have come from the realisation that he was sharing intimately in the lives of the women whom he had chosen to fulfil his special vocation. He must also have taken solace from the fact that he was following in the footsteps of Jesus. In the words of Sullivan:

By looking on Jesus as a free person I am able to make myself his ally, because he is on the side of the poor and the weak, and against the multinationals and the oil companies and the coffee lobby – that is, against everything that keeps men and women from being neighbours, from becoming close to each other in the present moment. (*Morning Light*, p. 129)

NO EASY GRACE

But cosy consolations and ease of mind are not parts of the Cross – rather their opposites. Small wonder then that characters like Ramon Rimaz and Strozzi appear in Sullivan's novels. They underpin the author's commitment to social justice and the Way of the Cross. Although each is a rebel in his own way, neither is seeking to overthrow one system in order to replace it with another. What matters is not systems, social prestige and material possessions but love, fraternity and justice. Strozzi's ability to bring warmth and

love into the lives of women like Arletta, an eighty six year-old, dejected figure whom he befriends when she is in need, is what marks him out as a special witness to Christian values. She says of him: 'He didn't talk about her soul or about God. He seemed to live with the strength and power of a man who had been brought back to life. All that he was good for was to rekindle light in eyes that had become dead.' (*Eternity My Beloved*, p. 120)

Other testimonies to his goodness are expressed but the most succinct is provided by Elizabeth:

His voice seemed to have crossed deserts, knocked over countless walls. It seemed to have come out of an experience that was different from ordinary life. It was as if he were making love to you without his realising it, and without your realising it, either. But it lasts. You have the desire to forgive. You'd like to pour out on others the love he's given you. (pp. 65-66)

Strozzi is a provocative figure who forces anyone who claims to be Christian to examine his lifestyle more closely. He also shows that faith can often exist where you might least expect to find it: on the margins, among the down-and-outs, the prostitutes, the freaks and the tramps whom Sullivan chose as his preferred characters. It is among such people that Jesus would choose to live were he to come among us today. The gift of love, when it comes from a man like Strozzi who is looking for nothing in return, can melt the heart of a hardened prostitute like Elizabeth who, in her turn, would 'like to pour out on others the love he's given you.' This is Christianity at its most dynamic with its ability to move mountains and to alter attitudes and behaviour. It is Christ-like as Strozzi himself was.

FAITH A MARGINAL OPTION

In the conclusion of his article last November, John Macken stated that faith will persist and that 'Christian faith will continue to witness, not without some conflict and confusion, to human and religious values.' Sullivan would concur, and would add that faith will be increasingly pushed to the margins where it will find new strength and vigour.

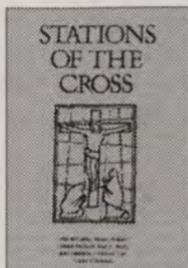
The lives of Ramon Rimaz and Strozzi illustrate how we need action rather than grandiose gestures and that we must be shocked out of spiritual lethargy by dynamic witnesses to faith. By

placing themselves on the margins of the Church, Rimaz and Strozzi achieve more of spiritual significance than the priests and bishops at the centre who speak in a void and who are incapable of reaching their congregations. The two have rediscovered the essence of Christianity as consisting in loving others in a selfless manner. Like us all, they are not perfect: they have their failings. But there burns within them a faith which reaches out to those who share their lives and who are touched by its flame.

As readers of Sullivan will testify, his is a voice to which it is virtually impossible to remain indifferent. In an era which is seeking a prophetic voice to stir it out of spiritual apathy, Sullivan's writings have the capacity to shake us out of our inertia. He says things that some of us have been thinking for a long time without being able to address them in his forceful manner. Since Bernanos, no French Christian writer has been able to assess the human condition in such a prophetic manner as Sullivan does. His ideas on faith strike a spark in his readers, believers and unbelievers alike. For him, it has to be a marginal option because it transforms our lives and makes us see things differently:

Before acting politically, faith acts poetically. It creates a new way of seeing, it sings the *Magnificat* – that is, it overturns the powerful, lifts up the lowly, not because it needs to but out of a sudden realization. It sees strength in weakness, glory in the things that are ridiculed. (*Morning Light*, p. 78)

Sullivan said he wrote for the few, those who could respond internally to his words and gain courage from them. Now that his words have been translated, we will have our chance to accept or ignore his version of the Cross.



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