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Jean Sullivan : Champion of the Marginalised

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Jean Sullivan, champion of the marginalised

'It is probably only now, in a period when the Church is being forced by external and internal forces to leave behind its imperialistic ambitions and to ally itself more obviously with the poor, that readers are beginning to appreciate the validity of Sullivan's testimony.' The author examines the life and work of a prophetic writer in contemporary France.

EAMON MAHER



THE READERS of *The Month* could be excused for never having heard of the French priest-writer, Jean Sullivan (1913-1980). His real name was Joseph Lemarchand and he took the 'nom de plume' Sullivan after the hero of Preston Sturges's Hollywood comedy, *Sullivan's Travels*. In this film, the hero, having become disillusioned with the life of a Hollywood director, uproots himself and spends his time wandering around



Jean Sullivan: Paulist Press, New York

America, being subjected to all sorts of hardship and misfortune. At the end of the film, he returns to Hollywood but he is a different person because of his experiences on the margins. His very pseudonym, therefore, gives us an insight into Sullivan's pre-occupations as a writer and man. He had a preference for those to whom Christ was always most attached, the poor and the unwanted.

In the person of the Abbé Pierre, the priest who has become the champion of the homeless in Paris, we have a modern-day embodiment of the type of Christian witness which Sullivan would have admired. He long maintained that the Church, if it were to succeed, would need to abandon all signs of triumphalism and identify more closely with the victims of injustice; the confused, the rebels, the marginalised. At the time he was writing, the 60's and 70's 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 probably only now, in a period when the Church is being forced by external and internal forces to leave behind its imperialistic ambitions and to ally itself more obviously with the poor, that readers are beginning to appreciate the validity of Sullivan's testimony.

The characters in Sullivan's novels, most of whom are based on real people, are marginal figures who, at a particular moment in their existence, choose or are forced to re-examine the direction of their lives. Many have lived comfortably, never thinking about kicking the system, rocking the status quo. But then a sudden moment of illumination completely changes their perception and they find themselves moving away from the centre of society to the margins, thus abandoning all financial security and social respectability. In *Morning Light*¹ (*Matinales*, Gallimard, 1976), which describes his spiritual journey, Sullivan makes the following observation:

From the start I feel close to all those whom society has marginalised — tramps, addicts, freaks, even 'establishment' types, empty of spiritual substance and beginning to realise it. They live in the midst of steel, glass high-rises, highways and they 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).

Freedom of thought and action, the warmth and fraternity which can come from suffering and deprivation, a distrust of all ideologies which seek to reduce humankind to a robotic existence; these are some of the qualities which distinguish Sullivan's characters. Tramps, prostitutes, drug addicts, wanderers, rebel priests recur as obsessional figures in his novels. The author likes those who question accepted truths, who seek out a more dynamic spiritual life, be it within or outside — for the most part outside — the institution of the Church. Above all, he advocates that the Christian take risks, put him/herself to the test so as not to fall into a 'comfortable' religious life.

As soon as circumstances make it possible, try to break out. Earn less, resign. I'm not telling you to absent yourselves or be content with simply watching the caravan of sadness, but to be present differently (*Morning Light*, p.170).

I propose to concentrate on three novels by Sullivan which underline his approach to the marginalised: *The Sea Remains* (*Mais il y a la Mer*, Gallimard, 1964), *Eternity my beloved* (*Car je j'aime ô Éternité*, Gallimard, 1966) and his last novel, which has not yet been translated into English, *Quelque Temps de la vie de Jude et Cie.* (Stock, 1979). My treatment of the novels will be in no way exhaustive. I present only the author's basic thesis on poverty, not a synthesis of his works.

In tune with his time

The publication of *The Sea Remains* brought Sullivan to public attention in France. Certain readers and critics, aware of the tradition of the 'Catholic Novel' and perhaps anxious to prolong it, saw in Sullivan a successor to Bernanos, with whom he shares a prophetic quality. Sullivan, however, was not interested in following in anyone's footsteps. A close reading of his novels reveals him to have been a writer who was in tune with his time, a time of questioning and revolt against traditional values. Although *The Sea Remains* is quite classical in terms of style, plot and structure, its main character, Cardinal Ramon Rimaz, does not conform to any traditional 'type'. As a member of the social

and ecclesiastical hierarchy, he spends years courting the good favour of the political leaders of his country, to the detriment of his interior life. He has become an administrator, an aloof figure who thinks little about the poor or the marginalised. His original vocation had little to do with triumphalism as the narrator points out:

You know, Ramon, that deep down your heart was always with the despised, the meek of this world, but you thought: what use is it if I am alone? (p.57).

His commitment to the victims of society, the marginalised, had become clouded by the showers of ecclesiastical honours. He comforted himself by thinking that one person cannot change the course of history. In his refuge beside the sea, he undergoes a 'conversion' and he begins to see life once more through the vision of his childhood. He is ashamed of pictures he sees in an old album of himself posing 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 a hint 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 rebellion does not manifest itself immediately. When it occurs it does not take the form of a spectacular gesture designed to attract public attention. The Cardinal has had enough of political intrigue, of shows and spectacles. His discussions with a female artist, Minka, whose 'friend', Monolo, is a political prisoner, open up to Ramon the opportunity of ending his life in a Christian manner. He becomes friendly with the Governor of the prison in which Manolo is an inmate and offers to address the prisoners. Thus begins a series of visits, the last of which will see him exchanging clothes with Monolo who escapes. The Cardinal becomes an object of disdain among the civil and religious authorities whose approval he had sought during his ecclesiastical career. It is not clear at the end of the novel whether he has been left to rot in jail or whether he has retired to a monastery. Neither do we know what could have motivated such an action? After all, the cardinal hardly knew Monolo, a vehement opponent of the Church. In a way, Ramon probably saw himself as following in Christ's footsteps:

Power and 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 becoming an 'outcast', a rebel, by upsetting the status quo, Ramon rediscovers his original commitment to the poor and the marginalised. When he has distanced himself from the lie he had been living, he is able to live humbly, to carry the cross, to endure some of the suffering and pain of Jesus. After all, as Sullivan himself wrote:

Jesus is on the side of the marginalised, the immigrants, the victims of prejudice, no doubt about it (*Morning Light*, p.50).

Strozzi, the hero of *Eternity my Beloved*, goes further than Ramon in his identification with the outcasts of society. In middle age, at a time when most people have settled into a comfortable routine, he finds himself in Paris during the German occupation. He soon realises that his priestly vocation is to live among the prostitutes of Pigalle. Strozzi is no 'boy scout': he does not choose to lecture his 'flock' on the error of their ways. Rather, he seeks to help them to face life in a better frame of mind, to see that they can be loved in a selfless manner. Sullivan was fascinated by Strozzi; he appears in several of his novels. Sullivan likes the fact that his hero feels no need to judge the prostitutes. Prostitution, in Sullivan's estimation, is as prevalent in marriage as it is on the pavement in Pigalle:

... It is everywhere, in freely entered into couplings or in marriage, business, politics, the press (*Joie errante*, Gallimard 1974, p.262).

At this point it is worth noting that Strozzi is no fictional character and that he was known personally to Sullivan. His name was Auguste Rossi and he appears in the famous novel by Gilbert Cesbron, *Les Saints vont en enfer* (1952), under the nickname, 'le Père Pigalle'. What would have appealed to Sullivan about Strozzi? Well first of all, he would have admired a man and a priest who was prepared to risk all to serve a group of women who have long been abused and vilified. He responded to a call, placed others ahead of self, and followed closely in the steps of Jesus. The testimony of the prostitutes with whom he came in contact underlines the deep impact his presence had on their lives. Elisabeth says of him:

She'd heard the other girls talking about him. They teased him, they laughed at him, but in a nice way, no doubt out of a sense of modesty; 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', many of whom have long since abandoned all practice of their religion. Their generosity of spirit is in stark contrast to the reaction of Strozzi's clerical colleagues who are quick to condemn him for associating with whores. The Cardinal who interviews him prior to his expulsion from the order is torn between anger and admiration:

'Who is this Strozzi? A saint, a crank, a poor wretch 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 the worker-priests who stood side-by-side with other 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 is one of the rare few who are 'chosen' to rebel against all kinds of unquestioned social and spiritual assumptions. One day freedom takes hold of them and turns them upside down. They see through the prejudices and artificiality, which always threaten to imprison those living at the centre of society, and follow an inner voice, which is perhaps a grace. The feelings of Sullivan with regard to his hero are obvious:

He treats the most tyrannised and downtrodden women as human beings; he demonstrates — no he doesn't demonstrate anything, he simply proceeds directly to his own truth, already living prophetically in the world to come (p.101).

Dynamic witnesses

Sullivan admits that Strozzi is his model priest: 'He lives what I just talk about'. Sullivan stopped short of living among the poor and the rejected. This was because he saw himself as a man of reflection and symbolic gestures rather than as a man of action. His writing, however, might awake a few slumbering souls and give them a reason to continue living. The testimony of Ramon Rimaz and Strozzi illustrates how we as Christians 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, they 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.

Sullivan's last novel, *Quelque Temps de la vie de Jude et Cie*, is situated in the Rue Fichte, in the 15th



Abbé Pierre

arrondissement of Paris, an area earmarked for demolition. The inhabitants of the tenement buildings and shops here, among them a Christ-like figure and priest, Jude, know God's love in an intimate way. Many of them have not heard much about religion but through their pain and suffering they live out some of what Christ endured on Calvary. The Rue Fichte, for all the physical decay of its buildings, contains within its confines a real community, bound together by love and a desire to experience life on the cliff's edge, to discover God through love and suffering.

Perhaps it is only the poor, those whom life has made poor in one way or another, who are capable of real love (*Quelque Temps*, p.16).

This is what attracts Jude to this unusual community, the human warmth and fraternity which unites those who are made to suffer. At this point, I feel it is appropriate to return to the Abbé Pierre, the eighty-two-year-old Catholic priest, who, over the Christmas period, took over an empty building in a chic part of Paris for one hundred and twenty-six squatters. Homelessness has become an election issue in France; many of those without fixed abode can be seen begging at tourist attractions and in the métro. The Abbé Pierre acted in a manner designed to stir public opinion, because he knew that the situation would get worse if people were not stung out of their complacency.

The parallels between the Rue Fichte and many present-day Parisien arrondissements are too obvious to escape unnoticed. Sullivan would still be writing about these people and the Abbé Pierre were he alive now. Through his writings we can get some insight into life on the margins and the kind of Christian witness the Church will have to provide if it is to have any hope of continuing what Christ began almost two thousand years ago. Were Christ to come among us today, would we recognise him? Do we realise, as Sullivan did, that it is no longer Christ who is crucified, but the poor, the rebels, the marginalised, those of whose existence most of us are so comfortably unaware.

To think that you might meet Strozzi on the sidewalks of the eighteenth arrondissement and take him for a retired. . . It's the same with the son of man; since the death of the last disciple his face no longer exists in anyone's glance. His face is everywhere now . . . in the subway, at Pigalle, in Pekin, loved, betrayed, sent back to Pilate or Herod or Caiphas (*Eternity my Beloved*, p.72).

Footnote

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

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