Carrying the Cross : Jean Sullivan's Mais il y a la mer

Eamon Maher
Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Carrying the cross

In The Sea Remains, Jean Sulivan emphasises that Christianity is not about carrying the cross symbolically, but about carrying it for real, writes Eamon Maher

The name Jean Sulivan will not mean anything to most readers of Reality, and that is a shame because we’re talking about a writer with a real prophetic voice. Born in the Breton village of Montauban-de-Bretagne in 1913, he died tragically in a hit-and-run accident as he emerged from one of his interminable walks in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris, in 1980. Before his death he had published 10 novels, several essays, two collections of short stories, and numerous articles and reviews in newspapers like Le Monde and La Croix. Described by Jacques Madaule (writing in Témoignage Chrétien, April 30, 1964) as ‘an author capable of following in the footsteps of Bernanos,’ Sulivan was always careful to avoid the pitfall of reinventing the Catholic Novel. He was cognisant of the fact that the social reality of the 1960s and 70s in France demanded a new approach on the part of writers like himself. He wrote in Petite littérature individuelle (1971): ‘It is in invention that the future of Christian writers lies if they want to be something other than specialists, scribes or efficient instruments in the market of religion.’

His view of his role as a writer was to shake readers out of their complacency, to make them uncomfortable in the way the Bible (the original Word) makes one uneasy; to open up a new space in which a type of underground spirituality might blossom.

Ordained priest
Ordained priest in 1938, he was sent to work in the diocesan school in Rennes and spent almost 30 years in this city where he distinguished himself as founder of a cultural centre and cinéclub, as well as a newspaper, Dialogues-Ouest, of which he was editor-in-chief. He came to literature late in life - his first novel Le Voyage intérieur appeared in 1958 under the pseudonym Jean Sulivan (his real name was Joseph Lemarchand) – but published on average a book a year between that and 1980. His superior, Cardinal Roques, showed unusual prescience for the time by encouraging the priest’s literary vocation and eventually allowing him to work full time as a writer. The cardinal showed bravery also, because Sulivan was no apologist for the Catholic Church: indeed, he was very critical at times of the abuse of power, the neglect of the poor and the betrayal of the example of Christ by certain members of the church and particularly by its hierarchy.

Conversion of a cardinal
The Sea Remains is Sulivan’s most accomplished novel. Published in 1964, it won the Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature and the Prix de l’Académie de Bretagne (the former award was a particu-
larly significant achievement). It relates the conversion of a cardinal, Ramon Rimaz, who in his retirement villa beside the sea begins a re-evaluation of his life as a priest, bishop and cardinal. 

In the months leading up to his retirement, he had been given some indication that his standing was no longer what it had once been. On one occasion he overheard a voice commenting on how feeble he had become, followed by muffled laughter. He composed his letter of resignation that very evening. With the time to reflect on his career, he realises that all his so-called triumphs amounted to very little indeed: 

"Poisoned, I'm poisoned," thought Juan Ramon. "Unbelievable. I would never have known if I hadn't let go."

Through a series of imagined flashbacks, conversations with people who knew him, especially his niece, Merche, and personal assistant, Campos, the narrator begins to flesh out the events that resulted in the cardinal's fateful decision at the end of the novel to take the place of a political detaine, Monolo Varglas, whom he allows to escape by exchanging clothes with him during a visit to the local prison. It is a gesture that shocks many people. What is at the root of it? Why would a prince of the church put himself in jeopardy for the sake of a misfit whom he barely knew?

No exact reasons are given for the radical change in his behaviour, but there are some key events that prove revealing. For example, it could have been the perusal of the newspaper articles and photographs depicting the various stages of his ecclesiastical career that filled him with disgust and convinced him that he needed to change drastically the course of his life. The narrator gives this interpretation: 'You were lying, Ramon, you were lying and you didn't know it.' (p.18) He sees photographs of himself with important people 'dominating them because of his height, proud or humiliated to be exposing himself this way at election rallies, fairs, or celebrations of false, long-ago victories, perhaps indifferent, simply waiting for it to be over.' (p.18) He turned to his housekeeper Doña Paca and announced that she was to burn all these images of a wasted past.

In some ways it is strange that he didn't kick against the superficiality sooner. But when one is so closely involved with an institution as powerful as the church, when one has devoted one's entire life to promoting its mission, it is difficult to see its faults. (In the same way as it is hard to believe that crime is rampant when one lives next door to a police station).

There can be no doubt, however, that the episode marked a turning point: 'One thing is certain: an idea had stirred in him, an obscure impulse was rousing him when he shouted to Doña Paca, his voice hard, pointing to the clippings, the brochures, the photos, all the debris of the past: Burn. Quema.' (p.31)
Child's soul
The awareness of his mortality is another factor in his conversion. One day he is seized by a feeling of faintness and thinks he is going to die: 'The evidence had been given him that it would suffice, not to will it, but simply to let himself go, to follow the route that had opened into the depths, if he wished to pass to the other shore.' (p.33) Such a revelation changes one's perception of what is involved in the Christian path.

Rimaz suddenly perceives the gap that gradually opened up between his original vocation, which had been to serve the poor, and his role as a high-ranking functionary within the church. He had suffered from 'petrification,' or a numbing of the soul, but now he resolved to 'live each day with a child's soul, his former child's soul, which was still intact within an adult's experience.' (p.47)

Fisherman's clothes
When he rediscovers his child-like vision, his humility, when he abandons the ecclesiastical 'costume' and starts to dress in a fisherman's clothes, Rimaz becomes accessible to the outside world.

By allowing Monolo Varglas to escape from prison, dressed in his clothes, Cardinal Ramon Rimaz was following the genuine Christian path. He was distancing himself from the political authorities in order to experience the fate of the poor, the marginalized of society with whom he wishes once more to be associated. When asked why in her opinion he did what he did, his niece, Merche, replies: "I believe – for no reason. He was beyond all explanations. Someone needed him. He went there naively. [...] Unless..."

Doubt surrounds the motivation of a gesture that goes beyond the scope of human understanding. Ramon Rimaz, on the threshold of death, came to the conclusion that his life as a priest had been at variance with the Gospel message of love: 'Temptation has ceased when he had come into power, when his heart had been changed to stone.' (p.81)

The kernel of the novel is contained in these lines. Christianity, in Sullivan's estimation, was not about carrying the cross symbolically, but authentically. The cardinal comes to see that there is not a huge difference between his own unease and that of Gonzalez who was trying '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)

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