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

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Writers on Catholicism 6

In this series, Eamon Maher looks at one book by an author who was marked by Catholicism

Carrying the cross

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

The name Jean Sullivan 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

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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,' Sullivan 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 Sullivan (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 Sullivan 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 Sullivan'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, Merché, 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 detainee, 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 house-

keeper 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)

Sullivan Mais il y a la mer



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,

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

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,

By allowing Monolo Varglas to escape from prison, dressed in his clothes, cardinal Ramon Rimaz was following the genuine Christian path.

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: 'To his endless amazement, by discovering the world he entered into the understanding of the gospel.' (p.81)

He meets with Minka, a Yugoslav painter who looks after the son of the political prisoner, Monolo, and has long conversations with her as they walk along the beach. Was it these conversations that led him to his decision? He had begun to preach in the church of Noria some time before his fateful act and the governor of the prison, impressed with what he heard, had invited him to address the prisoners. He went in full dress as an honour to the prisoners: 'His first words were: we are all sinners. His second: we are all in prison.' (p.101) He was given the freedom to come and go in the prison as he pleased.

Had he been more attentive, the governor might have realised from his sermons that Ramon was undergoing a serious reassessment of his inner life: 'He stumbled over the words: long silences punctuated his meditation. But the silence spoke: because you had a sense of a presence, that he was struggling with and against someone.' (p.99)

Carrying the cross

The day that the wealthy local landowner, Gonzalez, was killed when playing Christ in the Easter Altata passion play may also have influenced the path that the cardinal would follow. The symbolic crucifixion becomes a real one when some people, having discovered the true identity of the masked Christ, take the opportunity for revenge that is presented to them: 'The truth was in the game. All those who bowed down too low before the great of this world were preparing the violence of the slaves: violence for violence, an infernal circle. Power and all the prestige that accompanied it – Jesus had crucified them.' (p.110)

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)

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, Merché, 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 Sea Remains is a challenging novel that invites the reader to undergo a similar process to the one that ultimately leads its hero to the truth. It will not appeal to everyone, but then again, like the Gospel, it is not intended to. Rather, it seeks out the 'few' who are capable of embarking on a quest whose destination is uncertain but which holds out the possibility of eternal joy after the pain of the crucifixion. ✝

Eamon Maher has written several articles on Jean Sullivan and his translation of the writer's memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, was published by Veritas in 2000.