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The Transforming Power of Grace

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Writers on Catholicism

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

The name Graham Greene is synonymous with the 'Catholic Novel' in England. Other names associated with it are Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton and Evelyn Waugh.

I have always found it somewhat paradoxical that there are such well-known Catholic novelists in England, where Catholicism has been a minority faith for some centuries, whereas I cannot locate anyone of note in Ireland to whom one could justifiably apply this tag, with the possible exception of Kate O'Brien. Perhaps Irish novelists would have been far more 'Catholic' if the country had been less so.

The fact that Greene liked to evoke dramas associated with the Catholic faith such as sin and grace, salvation, the sacraments, the importance of good works, for a public which was for the most part antipathetic or indifferent to such issues, and still enjoyed success, is a tribute to his writing and its ability to transcend cultural and religious boundaries.

When *The Power and the Glory* was first published in 1940, Europe was in the throes of the Second World War and many people doubted the existence of God. Nevertheless, in spite of the poor timing and its strange subject matter, this book has had a profound impact on many Catholics, myself included, especially when it comes to considering the way in which grace can work through all sorts of unlikely people and situations.

What is it about?

So, what is the book about? Well, it is set in a South American country where Catholicism has been outlawed by the State and where priests carry a bounty on their heads.

One insignificant individual, an alcoholic familiarly referred to as the 'whisky priest,' tries to escape capture and execution by moving around as much as possible and draw-

ing the least amount of attention to himself. In the last parish in which he served, the priest had intercourse with his housekeeper one night when inebriated, and a daughter, Brigitta, resulted from their coupling. Such moral frailties as he possesses would seem to indicate that this is a far from ideal candidate for sainthood. Furthermore, he is a man who knows his unworthiness and yet who retains some quality that attracts people to him and makes them want to reveal their secrets.

Neil McEwan supplies the following analysis of the novel: '*The Power and the Glory* illustrates the maxim that 'one can't hand in a resignation to God,' in its priest, unworthy by human standards, who persists in his duty without expecting a reward.'¹ The daring nature of Greene's approach led to his novel being condemned by the Holy Office because it was 'paradoxical' and 'dealt with extraordinary circumstances.'²

Communist lieutenant

Part of the problem for Rome may have been due to the rather sympathetic portrayal of the Communist lieutenant who is the main pursuer of the priest. Imbued with a hatred of the church because of its acquisitive nature and its hypocrisy, this man sees himself as embarked on a type of crusade which will end only when the last priest has been tracked down and killed: 'He remembered the smell of incense in the churches of his boyhood, the candles and the laciness and the self-esteem, the immense demands made from the altar steps by men who didn't know the meaning of sacrifice.'³

He meets with his target on two separate occasions and fails to recognise him. At their second meeting he even goes so far as to give him money on his release from jail.

In my view, the lieutenant is somewhat contrived – he is

The transforming power of grace

*Graham Greene's **The Power and the Glory** is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which grace can work through all sorts of unlikely people and situations, writes*
Eamon Maher



too virtuous. But the novel is concerned with the priest more than with the lieutenant, and the priest's regrets and humiliation are what really move us. When Coral, a young English girl who shelters him from the police, asks him why he doesn't renounce his faith, he replies that it is 'impossible', 'out of my power.' To which the girl retorts: 'Like a birthmark.' (p.41) This is a good summary of what happens to many of Greene's characters: they 'catch religion like a disease' and feel unable to shake off its influence afterwards.

His great charity

The depth of the priest's charity can be seen when, after managing to escape over the border into a jurisdiction where he can minister the sacraments as long as he does it discreetly, he agrees to return when the American 'gringo,' a thief and a murderer, allegedly asks to see a priest before he dies. There can be no doubt that this is a trap, and the priest knows it, but he is also aware that he cannot turn his back on a sinner who on his death bed requests absolution.

There is no such opportunity for the priest himself to make a 'good death,' however, and therein lies the rub. He is at the service of others, but has no one to tender to his own needs. Once when in prison he had come across the outcasts of society and felt a certain solidarity with their plight: 'He had a sense of companionship which he had never experienced in the old days when pious people came kissing his black cotton glove.' (p.128)

His problem is that he is certain he is destined to go to hell because he has not had an opportunity to confess his sins: "You see I am a bad priest and a bad man. To die in a state of mortal sin, it makes you think." (p.126) Under those circumstances, how could he refuse to go to the gangster? Returning to face almost certain death, he is not at all despondent: "The oddest thing of all was that he felt quite cheerful; he had never totally believed in this peace." (p.180)

Catholic novelists often imply that suffering has a redemptive quality. This is brought out forcibly in *The Power and the Glory*. The Yankee gangster is aware that the priest has been tricked into coming to see him and, on a number of occasions, he implores him to "beat it, Father." He also tries to slip him some

weapons to aid his escape. But the priest is resigned to his fate and prays over the body of the American, while thinking: 'At the best, it was only one criminal trying to aid the escape of another – whichever way you looked, there wasn't much merit in either of them.' (p.190)

Humility

The night before his execution, the whisky priest has time to look back on what appears to him to be a most inglorious life. He is quick to pass an unfavourable judgement on himself, to

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see nothing beyond his failures and misdemeanours. His humility is touching. Nothing quite focuses the mind as much as the thought of impending death. The hero, or anti-hero, achieves a strange type of catharsis in his prison cell:

'He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint.' (p.210)

The workings of grace

What the reader learns from this novel is that there is no way of understanding the workings of grace. The priest himself doesn't see the good he does for others, the mark he leaves on them. According to Gene Kellogg: 'He (Greene) was simply the first modern Catholic writer to apply without flinching the ancient dogma that God judges man's heart, not his acts.' 'It is the unworthy priest's heart that saves him, or so we are led to believe. Why is it that the young girl, Coral, who dies in tragic circumstances, was transformed by her brief encounter with the priest? Her father, Mr Fellows, remarks: "But the odd thing is – the way she went on afterwards – as if he'd told her things." (p.214) Similarly, the young

boy, Luis, who was constantly irritated by his mother's insistence on reading from the lives of the saints to her children, spits at his former hero, the Communist lieutenant, for what he views as the unjust execution of the priest.

The last lines of the novel see him opening the door to another priest seeking refuge in his house and kneeling to kiss the stranger's hand. These two events alone are designed to make us think that the humble, imperfect, sinful priest is a vehicle for grace. In an essay he wrote on the French Catholic writer, François Mauriac, Greene stated that the main trait of Mauriac's characters is that they possess 'the solidity and importance of men with souls to save or lose.'

His own characters conform to this model. The whisky priest, the police officer, Scobie (*The Heart of the Matter*), the criminal Pinkie (*Brighton Rock*) and the adulteress Sarah (*The End of the Affair*) are all acutely aware of the fact that their actions can bring about their salvation or damnation. When leaving the village where his housekeeper and their illegitimate child live, the priest happens upon Brigitta and urges her to be mindful of her soul: 'The world was in her heart already, like the small spot of decay in a fruit. She was without protection – she had no grace, no charm to plead for her; his heart was shaken by the conviction of loss. He said, "My child, be careful..."' (p.81)

Once more, is it not possible that through his prayers and the laying down of his life for the American, her 'father' might have purchased salvation for this poor misfit also?

As I hope you will now see, Graham Greene was fascinated by the transforming power of grace, and his novel *The Power and the Glory* is an excellent exposé of his views on this subject. ❖

1. Neil McEwan, *Graham Greene* (London: Macmillan Modern Novelists, 1988), p.67.

2. *Ibid.*, p.4.

3. *The Power and the Glory* (London: Penguin Books, rpt. 1972), p.22. All references will be to this edition, with the page number in brackets

4. Gene Kellogg, *The Vital Tradition* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1970), p.126.