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## Preaching the Gospel in a De-Christianised Parish : Lessons from the "Diary of a Country Priest"

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# Preaching the Gospel in a de-Christianised parish

*George Bernanos' Diary of a Country Priest paints a vivid picture of the difficulty of ministering in a parish that is all but deaf to the message of Christianity. Though written in France almost three-quarters of a century ago, the problems that confront the main character in Bernanos' novel are also those which face many clergy in Ireland today, writes Eamon Maher in the first of a two-part article*

**G**eorges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*, published in 1936, has lost none of its power to convey the difficult task that confronts any priest who is asked to proclaim the Word of God to people who have no inclination to hear its message. In this first of two articles, I want to give a glimpse of the agony a simple young parish priest endures in a location somewhere in Normandy at the turn of the last century.

France has a long tradition of what they refer to as *la laïcisation*, the process of secularisation that has become familiar to us in Ireland in the past two decades or so. Church and State have been separate entities in France since 1905 and, in this regard, the removal of any religious monopoly on education forms a major difference between the Irish and French contexts.

Another difference lies in the fact that French lay people like Jacques Maritain were to the forefront when it came to questioning issues of a theological nature, whereas in this country the vast majority of the 'faithful' accepted without demur what was preached to them from the pulpit and reinforced in Catholic homes.

Louise Fuller's book, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, provides an invaluable examination of how the foundations of Irish Catholicism, based on an authoritarian clergy and a submissive laity, began to unravel from the 1950s as events like the Second Vatican Council, TV, economic prosperity, and more widespread travel and access to education led to resentment among many people at being told how to behave in their private and moral lives.

## **Cancerous growth**

But let's return to Bernanos and his humble priest. The priest arrives in the parish of Ambricourt full of enthusiasm, determined to be a force for good. He is in no way prepared for the challenges that confront him. He says in the first page of his diary: 'My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. Like so many others!'

This boredom, or indifference to all things spiritual, is like a cancerous growth that has taken hold of the parishioners. Towards the end of the novel, when the

priest is told that he has cancer of the stomach, we suspect that he has been 'infected' by his parish and by what he considers to be his futile attempts to bring order to it.

The landscape of Northern France during winter, characterised by mud and a heavy grey sky, reflect the mood of the priest very well: 'I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some way like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.' (3)

### Seeing his weakness

His initial pessimism is confirmed by his dealings with the parishioners. Sensing a certain weakness in their parish priest, the local merchants trick him into buying items for which he has no need. For example, the grocer M. Pamyre, who has two sons ordained priests, suggests that he drop in a few bottles of elderberry wine to the presbytery. The young curé naively (and incorrectly) assumes that they are a gift and that he won't be charged for them.

Everyone seems keen to exploit his innocence. His superiors believe him to be lacking in the sort of discipline that is required to run a parish. They fail to appreciate the strong inner life that elevates him above the ordinary. However, the readers of his diary have access to his most intimate thoughts: his frustration, humility, and close relationship with a God whose presence is not always evident. While he commits many of his thoughts to paper, he admits that he could never bring himself to write about many of the things that he only confides to God.

### Only role model

The only real role model he possesses is the Curé de Torcy, an efficient, strong administrator who suspects the saintly qualities of his young confrere but who tries nonetheless to make him face down those who abuse his good nature: "When I was your age we had men in the church – don't frown, it makes me want to clout you – men I say – make what you like of the word – heads of a parish, masters, my boy, rulers." (9)

In Ireland, we had a good number of this breed of cleric at the turn of the last century also. Although he is at times severe with his colleague, Torcy appreciates that he is sincere in what he is seeking to achieve. The problem is that, like a nun Torcy used to know who became obsessed with keeping the church clean and died from the effort, the task Ambricourt sets himself is doomed to failure. Torcy explains: "The mistake she made wasn't to fight dirt but to try and do away with it altogether. As if that were possible! A parish is bound to be dirty." (11)

### All kinds of obstacles

The curé d'Ambricourt is not so ambitious as to seek to eliminate all the dirt in his parish: what he wants is to provide a Christian witness within the community,

to open up a few people's hearts to the love of God.

At every turn, he meets obstacles. His relations with the local gentry are particularly hazardous. The Comte is having an affair with the governess, Mlle Louise, who is in her turn the object of the hatred of her pupil, Mlle Chantal. The latter seems to take pleasure in recounting the lurid details of the affair to the parish priest. She vows that she will either kill the governess or take her own life. There is something about the demeanour of the curé that makes her want to upset his calm exterior: "I heard them at it in the night. I was right under their window in the park. They don't even bother to draw the curtains now." (132)

She is definitely trying to provoke him with this revelation. He senses her rebellion, her pain, and does not yield to her as she expects he will. Instead, he has a moment of inexplicable insight as he asks her to give him the letter she is hiding in her bag. The letter describes her intention to leave the Château because of her father's affair and her mother's indifference, to go to Paris where she will disgrace herself. Taken aback at the order to hand over the letter about which she hasn't uttered a word, she says: "You must be the devil." (136) What she is too young to appreciate is his ability to read into souls, to get evil to reveal itself: 'An unusual, almost alarming nobility of expression bore witness to the power of evil, of sin, that sin which was not her own – God, are we really such wretched creatures that a proud soul in revolt must needs turn against itself?' (137)

We will say more about Chantal in the next article. She forms a good example of someone who is at vari-

***He is tempted by what he considers the most deadly sin, the sin against hope, but it is very difficult to carry on hoping when nothing seems to be going right.***

ance with God because of her miserable personal circumstances. The priest, so ineffectual when it comes to finance and administration, gets strength for what he views as the serious issues, such as combating sin. The diary is therapeutic for him, as it allows him to express some of his anxieties and to feel less alone: 'As I sit here scribbling in the lamplight, pages no one will ever read, I get the feeling of an invisible presence which surely could not be God – rather a friend made in my image, although distinct from me, a separate entity.' (24)

### Holy Communion preparation

One of the tasks he most looked forward to were his meetings with the children to prepare them for Holy Communion. Instead of the expected innocence, he

finds his students sexually precocious. He had hope for one girl in particular, Seraphita Dumouchel, the star of his catechism class. She inflicted a serious blow when she announced, in front of the other children, that she only listened to him because he had 'nice eyes.' Worse was to come: 'But the poor child – probably egged on by the others – pursues me now with surreptitious oglings, grimacing, apeing a grown-up woman in a way that is very hard to bear.' (28) Even the catechism classes thus become less than edifying. (Seraphita will redeem herself, however, as we will discover later).

He gets to the stage where he feels that the 'village has nailed me up here on a cross' (40) and is watching

hanging on his bedroom wall.' (116) It doesn't come as a huge surprise when he is found dead in a wood one morning, his skull blown out. Suicide is suspected as the cause of his death.

In the course of their conversation, Ambricourt sensed the struggle that was going on in the doctor's soul. He notes in his diary: 'I know I have very little experience, yet I seemed instantly to recognise a certain inflection betraying some profound spiritual hurt. [...] True pain coming out of a man belongs primarily to God it seems to me. I try and take it humbly to my heart, just as it is. I endeavour to make it mine – to love it.' (82-83)

Delbende, a potential friend, dies in unfortunate circumstances, and the curé takes his pain and 'communes' with it. He wonders what he can do to be a more effective priest. He is tempted by what he considers the most deadly sin, the sin against hope, but it is very difficult to carry on hoping when nothing seems to be going right. He is embarked on a mystical journey where silence and darkness are his only companions: 'A void was behind me. And in front a wall, a wall of darkness.' (103)

#### **Priestly function**

Bernanos, a committed Catholic, was fascinated with the priestly function. He is possibly the lay writer who describes most accurately the lives of many priests, faced with hostility and a secular environment that is hostile to Christianity. A priest is the central figure in the majority of his novels. The *Diary* is rightfully considered his masterpiece because of the way in which readers can identify closely with the trials and tribulations of a saintly priest who is viewed by all, bar a select few, as a failure.

The problem with the work of priests, however, is that it is impossible to assess the true value of their ministry. Saying Mass, ministering the Sacraments, running parishes – these are only the public side of their vocation. What happens when they assist at death-beds, or in moments of spiritual despair, in the confessional? These cannot be known to anyone other than the people involved.

The readers of Bernanos' novel are given a rare insight into how external appearances can be false. The country priest is exposed to ridicule, exploitation, bullying, and yet he manages to bring succour to a few people who are, like him, experiencing the dark night of the soul. His 'success' is seen in the way in which he is a vehicle for dispensing grace, which is what we will be analysing in next month's article.

I think many sincere and good priests in secular, post-Christian Ireland, are experiencing much of the same despair as Bernanos' character. They are suspected, labelled, vilified in many instances for things over which they have no control. But this marginalisation might well lead to a higher spiritual plane and a humility that is at the heart of the Christian path, as eventually happens with Bernanos' character.

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him die. He is closer to the truth than he realises. His poor health (his diet consists of dry bread dipped in red wine – Bernanos deliberately uses these symbols of the sacrifice of the Mass) and appearance lead people to the conclusion that he is a drunkard. Misunderstood, unloved, seriously ill, he nevertheless sets about visiting each house in his parish. He invariably says the wrong things, doesn't accept the food that is offered to him, feels awkward in their presence – and still he perseveres. Torcy gives him the following rare compliment: 'I'm always calling you a ragamuffin, but I respect you. [...] As far as I can see, there's no doubt about your vocation. To look at you, you're more like the stuff that monks are made of. No matter. You may not have broad shoulders, but you've got grit.' (59)

#### **Unlikely ally**

Not many of his superiors see his good qualities. The Dean of Blangermont, having been informed by Mme Pamyre that the bill for the wine is still outstanding, stresses the importance of keeping strict accounts. He also outlines the danger of becoming an intellectual, which he says is tantamount to being a rebel! It is significant that the young priest should find an ally in Dr Delbende, a man considered to have heretical views on the church. Of particular concern to him is the preference the priests show to the rich. Delbende had once entertained the ambition of becoming a missionary priest but lost his faith in the course of his medical studies: 'He would hurl questions at a crucifix