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Preaching the Gospel in a De-Christianised Parish 2 : The Healing Power of Grace

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The healing power of grace



George Bernanos' THE DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST is essential reading for any of us who have known suffering in this life and who wonder what may await us once we cross the threshold of death. Though written in France almost three-quarters of a century ago, the issues Bernanos deals with – the spiritual void, the vain search for grace and illumination – are still to the forefront in contemporary Ireland and elsewhere, writes Eamon Maher in the second of a two-part article

In last month's article, we discussed the problems that confronted Bernanos' priest as he attempted to minister in a dechristianised parish. His situation goes from bad to worse when he becomes embroiled in the affairs of the local gentry. Mlle. Chantal had already told him about the affair between her father and the governess, and he knows that he is walking on thin ice when he goes to meet Mme la Comtesse at the Château. He has been suffering from chronic stomach pains, a lack of sleep, and is on the verge of spiritual despair. The previous night he had submitted the following thoughts to his diary:

'The world of evil is so far beyond our understanding. Nor can I really succeed in picturing hell as a world, a universe. It is nothing, never will be anything but a half-formed shape, the hideous shape of an abortion, a

stunted thing on the very verge of all existence.' (144)

It is surprising that in a small parish like Ambricourt there should be so much evidence of evil. Ambricourt is a microcosm of French society during the 1930s, a society that was in the clutches of the Prince of Evil. The priest seems poorly equipped to undertake a titanic struggle against Satan. But he proves far more resilient than one might suspect.

The reason for his visit to the Château is to make arrangements for a service that the Comtesse organised every six months in memory of the dead members of her family. Foremost among these is her son, whose premature death has thrown the mother into a state of dejection. Mention of Chantal arouses her anger. When the priest accuses her of not loving her daughter, the Comtesse explodes, and tells of the pain that has been visited on her by the death of her

young son. Her husband's infidelities and her daughter's rebellion are nothing compared to this. She continues to observe her religious duties in a mechanical way and looks forward to when she will be reunited with her son in heaven. The priest observes:

'For some time now I have had the impression that my mere presence will draw sin out, summon it up to the surface [...] As though the enemy scorned to hide himself from such a puny adversary, as though he came to defy me openly, laugh in my face.' (153)

Confrontation with evil

This type of confrontation between the priest and Satan is a feature of Bernanos' novels. His priests, outwardly inept and awkward, nevertheless possess the quality of reading into souls, of getting people to give verbal expression to their spleen.

The Comtesse senses that she is

being drawn out of the shell into which she retreated many years previously after receiving what she considered an unjust punishment from God. She feels that her observation of her Christian duties is sufficient to ensure entry into heaven. The priest reminds her that she has responsibilities also to her husband and remaining child, whom she neglects. He then warns that God will break her:

"Break me! God's broken me already. What more can He do? He's taken my son. I no longer fear Him." (162)

She is shaken when told that her hard heart might keep her from him for all eternity:

"Hell is not to love any more, madame." (163)

This scene is the most famous one in the novel. The Comtesse gradually begins to see that the priest is right, that she has become injured to everything other than being reunited with her son. Her metaphysical revolt has endangered her salvation. The hatred and resentment she feels towards God are used by the priest to bring calm to her soul:

"You no longer hate Him. Hate is indifference and contempt. Now at least you're face to face with Him." (168)

Chantal has been witness to the strange peace that takes hold of her mother at the end of her interview with the priest. She cannot understand what has taken place as she observes from the garden below her mother and the priest engaged in animated discussion. The struggle in the Comtesse finally comes to an end as she is told to recite the Our Father while paying particular attention to the words: "Thy will be done." Up until now she had found it impossible to accept God's will. Through the action of grace, she eventually manages to do so.

Troublesome concept

Grace is a troublesome concept with which to come to grips. It is beyond words and meaning. Its effects, however, are evident from the following lines:

'Words seemed so trivial at that moment. I felt as though a mysterious hand had struck a breach in who knows what invisible rampart, so that peace flowed in from every side, majestically finding its level, peace unknown to the earth, the soft peace of the dead, like deep water.' (170)

The peace he describes is that of the Comtesse. His own dark night of the soul is far from ended. That evening a letter is delivered to the presbytery from the Château in which the Comtesse reveals the extent of her spiritual rehabilitation and expresses her gratitude:

'I have lived in the most horrible solitude, alone with the desperate memory of a child. And it seems to me that another child has brought me to life again. I hope you won't be annoyed with me for regarding you as a child. Because you are! May God keep you one for ever!' (175)

The priest certainly maintains the spirit of childhood through his simplicity and sincerity, his way of seeing things as only children can see them: with lucidity, and yet a charming innocence. One might have expected some relief from the pain he is experiencing after this positive acknowledgement of his role in bringing peace to a tormented soul. Instead, the interview brings more problems when it is rumoured that the Comtesse's death, which occurs the night after their altercation, may have come about as a result of the trauma she experienced at his hands.

Chantal told her father and others of the impact the episode had on her mother. The Comte's uncle, Canon la Motte-Beuvron, comes to speak to the curé about the incident. He wants him to write down a short description of what passed between them but, were he to do that, the curé would be betraying a sacred trust. So he remains silent and merely says that in his opinion the Comtesse was ready to die. Later that evening he marvels at how he can bring hope to others but not to himself:

'Oh, miracle – thus to be able to

give what we ourselves do not possess, sweet miracle of our empty hands!' (180)

His Golgotha

More sleepless nights, punctuated by horrible stomach cramps and hallucinations, follow as he painfully climbs his Golgotha. He wonders if he has 'assumed' the burden from which he released the Comtesse: 'The woman to whom I had given absolution, whom death was to win a few hours later on the threshold of her tranquil room so peaceful in its security [...] already belonged to the unseen world.' (199) He, on the other hand, is still very much part of this dark, material world which offers him no shelter: 'Her long ordeal was over, fulfilled. Mine is just beginning.' (199)

It appears unjust that people should display so much hostility towards his person when all he wants is to help them. Canon la Motte-Beuvron is correct in this assessment:

"You see, dear child, these people don't hate you for being simple, they're on their guard against it, that's all. Your simplicity is a kind of flame that scorches them." (187)

Reading through the diary that recounts the itinerary of a simple man whom we suspect may well be a saint, the unavoidable conclusion that one draws is that the Christian path is a painful experience. Especially if you happen, as is the case with the poor curé, to be called on to undergo the rigours of Christ's Passion. Bernanos does little to disguise the analogy he wishes to draw: the priest is reduced to a diet of bread and wine; he is vilified for his silence and does nothing to defend himself in the face of accusations that are hurled at him; he is deprived of sleep and forced to stumble alone in the darkness – all reminiscent of the various stages in the Lord's Passion.

Returning one night from another fruitless visit to some parishioners' homes, he falls three times (like Christ under the Cross)

and is found in a pool of blood by Seraphita, his 'little Samaritan,' who washes him and apologises for her disgraceful behaviour during catechism class. She was jealous of the attention he paid the other girls and wanted to make him suffer. She doesn't fully understand what prompted her cruel comments: "It's just 'cause you're sad. You're sad even when you smile. I think that if I only knew why you was sad – I shouldn't be wicked no more." (229)

Unique honour

Seraphita redeems herself by the discreet way she cares for the curé in his hour of need. She tells him that she doesn't believe the rumours that are circulating about his excessive drinking – it is then that he realises that he has vomited blood and that he is seriously ill. He also has the revelation that he may be the recipient of a unique honour: 'that I remain the prisoner of His Agony in the Garden. Who would dare take that honour upon himself?' (203)

After a few more haemorrhages, the curé decides that he cannot put off seeing a consultant in Lille any longer. Before his departure, Chantal comes to see him. She is pleased to be rid of Mlle Louise, the governess, and to be alone again with her father. But she is still uneasy about her mother's apparent conversion. She claims that she's not afraid of going to Hell, that she still doesn't accept the existence of an all-loving God. She cannot understand the power that the meek priest exercises over her, the things she says to him. What exactly happened between him and her mother on that fateful occasion?

"When you talked to mother I was hiding under the window. And suddenly her face became so-so gentle. I hated you then. I don't believe much in miracles, not any more than I do in ghosts, but I think I knew my mother. She cared no more about pretty speeches than a fish for an apple. Have you a secret, yes or no?" (256)

The very formulation of the

question provides its own answer. Chantal has been affected by meeting this mysterious priest. She has been the unsuspecting recipient of the grace that touches those with whom he comes in contact. Her rebellion, like that of her mother before her, is beginning to dissipate.

Worst nightmare

But the priest is still far from peace. His consultation with a doctor who is addicted to morphia brings the realisation of his worst nightmare – he is suffering from malignant cancer and has very little time to live. His first reaction, a very human one, is regret at leaving behind a world that now seems strangely attractive. He is angry at himself for not thinking of God at that moment:

'However hard I try now, I know I shall never understand by what terrible mischance I was able at such a time to forget the very name of God. I was alone, utterly alone, facing my death – and that death was a wiping out, and nothing more. With fearful speed the visible world seemed to slip away from me in a maze of pictures; they were not sad, but rather so full of light and dazzling beauty. How is this? Can I have loved it all so much?' (275)

When people are on the verge of dying, they see things in a completely different light. For all that his life was mundane and full of disappointments, the young priest still found comfort in the daily scenes that passed before his eyes. He regrets that he didn't take more time to appreciate them. He is also sad that he will not have adequate time to complete his work in Ambricourt.

He makes his way to the apartment of a former friend from the seminary who now lives in Lille. Dufréty, as the man is called, has left the priesthood but still speaks at length about his 'intellectual development' and feels compelled to hide the fact that he is living in irregular circumstances with a woman he met while recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium.

It is in these unwholesome surroundings that the suffering of Ambricourt comes to an end. Dufréty discovers the diary after his death and writes to the curé de Torcy to tell him about his friend's last moments on this earth. Dufréty had sent for a priest on discovering Ambricourt on the

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threshold of death and when he expressed disappointment that the latter might not arrive on time, he was told gently: "Does it matter? Grace is everywhere..." (298) These were his last words.

The Diary of a Country Priest is one of the finest literary depictions of the strange workings of grace. The world of the Norman parish of Ambricourt may seem very far removed from the revelry of Temple Bar and the demand for instantaneous satisfaction that characterise life in the Celtic Tiger era. Bernanos dwells on the more dramatic aspects of spiritual life, the struggle between sin and grace, good and evil, but in a way that transcends time and place. The issues he deals with are still to the forefront in contemporary Ireland and elsewhere. The spiritual void, the vain search for grace and illumination – are we not still attempting to cope with these problems in the postmodern world in which we now live?

I believe that *The Diary* is essential reading for any of us who have known suffering in this life and who wonder what may await us once we cross the threshold of death. It is to be hoped that we will then experience something of the sanctifying nature of divine grace. ■