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Coping with Death alongside Jean Sullivan

Jean Sullivan's memoir of the death of his mother helps us to anticipate our own good-byes and to enjoy the moments we share with those whom we love, writes Eamon Maher

When I translated Jean Sullivan's memoir of the death of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, I figured that it would certainly strike a chord with Irish readers. But the positive reaction has even surprised me. It has served to illustrate that Irish people are still more than a little interested in matters pertaining to faith and spirituality. Sullivan (his real name was Joseph Lemarchand) was a French priest-writer who took his nom de plume after watching Preston Sturges' Hollywood comedy, *Sullivan's Travels*.

He wrote novels, short stories and a spiritual journal, *Morning Light*, which has also been translated into English and is well worth a read. However, I want to talk about his memoir, which is a brutally frank portrayal of the relationship between a man and his mother. Its theme is universal, as death is something to which we must all give due consideration.

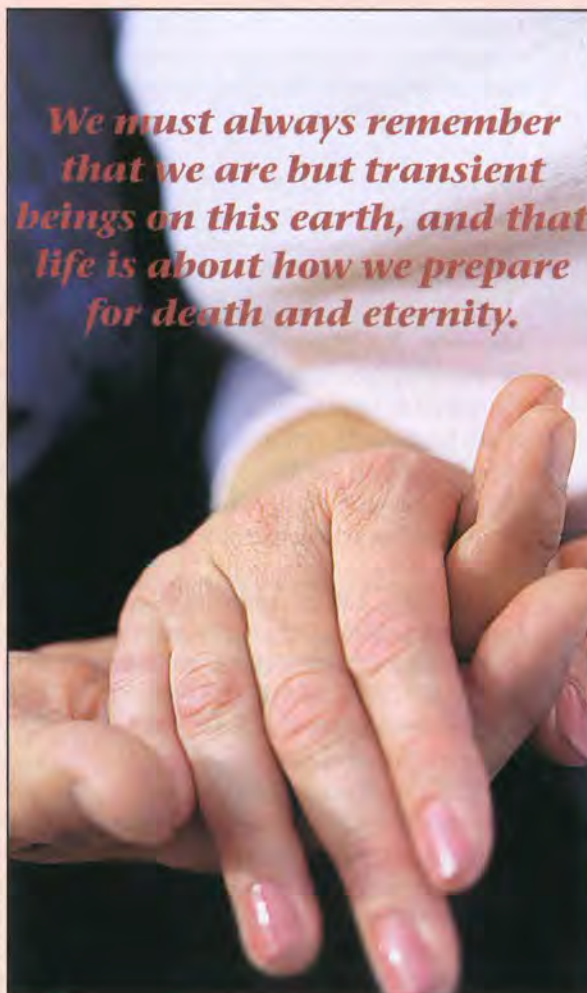
The account of his relationship with his mother, a Breton woman of a very staunch faith, and of her demise, does not generate any of the feel-good qualities of your average death-counselling manual. No effort is made to sanitise death. Neither is there any resolution to his mother's spiritual dilemma at the end of the account. Abandonment, revolt

and anguish are what characterise the old woman's last moments on this earth. She takes the place of Christ on the naked cross but in her eyes Sullivan sees her horror. "Why did God make us mortal?" is what he knows she is thinking. He, the priest, the loved son of a first marriage to a man killed in the trenches during World War I, looks on aghast, as she refuses the rosary beads that he offers her in the hospital. Similarly, she turns her head away when he points to the crucifix on the wall. He wonders how can this be the reaction of a woman whose faith was so strong up until this point.

Spiritual void

For Sullivan, the momentary crisis his mother went through before dying forced him to look again at his attitude to faith and eternity. He discovered that faith can also be found in the absence of faith, in the spiritual void that the mystics endure before the joyful revelation of the Absolute.

Christ himself experienced abandonment and despair on the Cross. What right have his followers, therefore, to expect a smooth passage from this life to eternity? Sullivan sees that it is when all the comforts are taken away from us, all the reassurances that religion supplies about the after-life, we finally come to know God, another name for death. But this insight is not achieved before a struggle of considerable proportions takes place in his soul. He feels totally helpless at his mother's bedside. The functional priest doesn't function: that is to say he cannot supply any easy comforts to her in her hour of need. She did get the Sacrament of the Sick from the hospital chaplain but her son appears to serve no worthwhile purpose. His first reaction (a very human one) is dismay at the thought of losing his refuge (there will be no more Sunday visits, no more comforting presence to which to turn when in turmoil). His next thought, no more comforting, is that we must all die alone. What use to us, then, are the material possessions and social stature for which we have striven during our time on this earth? Sullivan captures it very well: 'We are all blind thinking that life consists of possessing material goods, holding onto this, then that, getting to know one thing, then another, trying desperately



to ignore the fact that the whole process amounts to absolutely nothing. Life isn't just a game where you have to possess and know as many things as possible. Rather, it is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way.'

Finding his niche

Such a message should not be ignored in the Ireland of today where we are enjoying the fruits of economic success – and this is a good thing – but where a significant number of people are struggling to find some spiritual nourishment in the midst of all the material prosperity. Sullivan realises that what he thought of as faith was nothing more than a collection of ideas that had not become a part of him. It was therefore superficial and facile, belonging more to the intellect than to the heart. He admits that he had difficulty conforming to the traditional image people had of the priest. Finally, he found his niche in culture. This allowed him to present dogma in a modern form by quoting from the specialists and by exploring literature and the new world of cinema. People would tell him how fascinating his sermons were, but he was thrown one day when a man, touched by his sermon, asked him: "What do you think I should do?" He hadn't planned on someone taking what he had to say in such a radical manner. He slowly begins to see that to really follow the Gospel message of unconditional love, it is necessary to place oneself in the desert of doubt and apprehension, to take spiritual risks, to know pain at the deepest level. In accompanying his mother on her climb to Galgotha, he experiences first hand the Passion of Christ. He remembers his youth in Brittany, the death of his father, the re-marriage of his mother, his formation in the seminary, his birth to literature, the Sunday visits to see his mother, now living alone. Past, present and future alternate. The book begins with him driving to see his mother (who has now died) and saying how he will go at the front of the funeral cortège when they bring her remains to the valley of Jehosophat, which is the name they give to the local cemetery. There is no linear development in the narrative. Memories are mixed in with present moments and anticipations of the future. He is relieved to remark on

this occasion the silhouette of his mother, Angela, couched in the window frame. It will not always be there. Every goodbye is the last goodbye.

Vain attempts

What strikes me when reading the account of her internment in hospital (first of all in Rennes and then in Nantes) is Sullivan's vain attempts to secure special treatment for his mother. He even admits that he is sorry not to have worn his collar as that might have meant something to any nurse who was pious. He hates the impersonal way in which his mother is treated and would love for her to be transported back home, surrounded by familiar objects. He is appalled when, on arriving in Nantes, the ambulance driver insists that the patient remove her gown which must return to Rennes. His mother is cold, and now is obliged to suffer indignity as well. Sullivan understands that hospital staff cannot afford to become too attached to their patients but still he resents what his mother has to go through. Surely, they could do more for her, cure her of this ailment. The greatest shock of all is his mother's momentary crisis of faith:

'The worst part was the knowledge that my mother hadn't accepted death. She had protected herself all during her life with words, religious practices. She had had all the feelings of piety, of resignation, of knowing God's love, but she hadn't been able to accept the reality of death.' (p.124)

After witnessing the spiritual desolation of his mother, Sullivan reckons that he wants nobody apart from medical specialists to be present at his own death because: "It is frightening to show this spectacle to any living person." (113) The doctors finally admit that there is no hope for his mother, and the decision is made to transport her home to die. In fact, she dies on entering the ambulance. The driver continues the journey nevertheless but asks that her eyes be left open. Sullivan sees the trees and the skies reflected in these lifeless eyes and finds it comforting in a way. We might have expected some optimism from him at the funeral. He doesn't appear to have taken any active role in the ceremony. When the coffin was being closed, he fled to the garden, and the tears flowed. Rather than making a spectacle of his grief, he wore dark

glasses during the procession. He must have appeared hard and aloof to onlookers. He shares his anguish with his readers:

'I am now the son of nobody. I will go now, mother, like an adult, towards my Maker. You were a sign that he existed: I knew through you of his presence... Now that you are gone there is nothing else between me and death, that is to say between me and God.' (p.120)

Up the queue

Sullivan has moved up the queue and his death has been rendered closer by the disappearance of his mother. When people offer their condolences, he gets no comfort from their physical presence around him. I have always found that the tradition of shaking hands with people who have suffered a bereavement is a type of reassurance that you, at least, are still alive. Pressing the flesh of another living human being reinforces the life-blood running through your veins. Sullivan is so right in the following observation:

'The traditional rituals associated with death only want one thing – to eliminate as quickly as possible the suffering of those who are still alive, to expel the dead from this life once and for all in a flood of tears.' (p.116)

Quite so. But he cannot undergo this process, and grieves privately and deeply. Everything around him reminds him of his dead mother. Hands twisted by arthritis, shawls on old women's shoulders, news reels which remind him of how his father died. Emptiness is what he experiences. It takes him years to come to terms with his loss. When he does so, however, he realises that going through such pain has made him more human, a better writer. It also allowed him to detach himself from the folklore of religion, and made him a wanderer. By describing in stark terms the death of his mother, by allowing us to share in his pain and doubts, he has produced a most worthwhile memoir that will help us all to anticipate our goodbyes and to enjoy the moments we share with those whom we love. We must always remember that we are but transient beings on this earth, and that life is about how we prepare for death and eternity. Read *Anticipate Every Goodbye* and learn something about what the Christian path is all about. ■