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Introduction

At the present time in France, organized religion has largely lost its popular appeal. A centuries-old tradition of secularism has replaced God in the hearts of many. It is not therefore surprising that the 'Catholic novel' in its best-known form - that of the thirties, when Bernanos and Mauriac wrote their greatest novels - is no longer being written by contemporary novelists. That sort of novel simply does not reflect the current spiritual crisis in French society. But there are some writers, and Jean Sullivan (1913-1980) is among them, who do portray the human need of and quest for a divine presence in life. Sullivan, however, seeks this for the most part outside the beaten paths of the institutional Church. Indeed, in his thought the Church is but one medium among many which people use in their quest for the Absolute. The move away from institutional religion in France does not necessarily imply a lowering in spiritual fervour. It means that the emphasis and approach have altered.

Jean Sullivan is a French 'writer-priest' but he does not seek to propose an apologia for the Catholic religion. Since Vatican II the Catholic Church has undergone an upheaval. The change of the liturgy from Latin to the vernacular, the stated commitment to social justice and ecumenism, the loosening of the restrictions pertaining to clerical dress and behaviour, the emphasis on the informed 'individual conscience', have all served to change the nature of Catholicism. For a writer like Sullivan, the real changes were of an inner order, brought about when the monolithic magisterium of the Catholic theological tradition finally began opening itself to the many changes of the modern world, allowing him and many like him to opt for a personal and somewhat unusual vocation. Sullivan's writing at the time of Vatican II shows him to have been in tune with these changes before they became fact.

Sullivan is at a crossroads in French Christian letters as he arrived when Bernanos had died and when Mauriac had all but abandoned the

novel for journalism. French society during the sixties and seventies was in turmoil: the Church had lost much of its influence, especially among the proletariat; new ideologies were becoming more and more prevalent; ideas about God, the Sacraments, morality were being strongly challenged. The climate is very far removed from that of the more homogeneous years during which the 'Catholic Novel' flourished. Action Catholique became suspect at Rome, Cardinal Suhard's 'worker-priests' were out of favour at the Vatican and there was a sudden decline in religious observance as well as in vocations. Allied to all this confusion was the convocation and implementation of Vatican II. So to speak of a 'crisis' in religious and social terms is not an exaggeration.

To underline the value and originality of Sullivan it is worth considering in some depth two of his best-known novels: *Mais il y a la mer* (1964) and *Car je t'aime ô éternité* (1966).

The publication of *Mais il y a la mer*¹ brought Sullivan to public attention in France. Certain readers and critics, aware of the tradition of the 'Catholic Novel' and perhaps anxious to prolong it, saw in Sullivan a successor to Bernanos with whom he shares a certain prophetic quality. *Le Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature* and *Le Prix de l'Académie de Bretagne* were bestowed on Sullivan for this work. But he would later castigate himself for being vain enough to accept them, for these were the sort of honours the hero of his novel, Cardinal Rimaz, had repudiated. Sullivan felt that he had betrayed himself by accepting these awards. In 1966 he would write about this in his autobiography, *Devance Tout Adieu*:

Imposteur! tu décris un cardinal qui renonce à la pourpre, à tous les signes de gloire, et toi, l'auteur, le peintre de ce cardinal à naître, tu oses te montrer, te laisser encenser.² (Imposter! you describe a cardinal who decides to abandon his purple robe of office and all the external signs of glory, while you, the author, the one who brought this man into being, you dare show yourself in public to lap up all this praise.

In the novel Cardinal Rimaz arrives at the evening of life before he appreciates that his role as an administrator within the Church has not been loyal to the message of the Gospel. He reflects on a 'glorious' career and realizes how futile the pomp and the ceremony have been, the fashionable robes, the mitre and ring, his place among the

'notables'. His vocation has little to do with triumphalism as he remarks of himself:

Tu sais bien, Ramon, que tu as toujours été, au fond de toi, du côté des petits, mais tu disais: à quoi bon si je suis le seul?³ (You know, Ramon, that deep down your heart was always with the despised, the little ones of this world but you thought: what use is it if I am alone?)

His commitment to the poor, to the marginalized, had become clouded by the shroud of ecclesiastical honours. He comforted himself by thinking that one person cannot change the course of history. In the seclusion of his refuge beside the sea he undergoes a 'conversion' and begins to see life once more through the vision of his childhood. The proximity of the sea serves to aid his re-examination of a life which suddenly seems superficial. His discussions with a woman artist, Minka, and Monolo, her lover, who is a political prisoner and a vociferous opponent of God, strengthen Ramon's resolve to finish his life in an evangelical sacrifice. His last gesture is a symbolic and significant one. He helps Monolo to escape by exchanging clothes with him during one of his many visits. Monolo then gets away in the Cardinal's car. In this way Ramon ensures the happiness of Monolo's child and of Minka. This act serves to atone in some way for his own past failings.

After his disappearance his friend, Campos, thinks back over Ramon's repudiation of a gesture by two priests some years previously. They, in a re-enactment of the passion of Christ, volunteered to carry the cross themselves. The reason for the Cardinal's disdain is now clear to his friend:

...je suis certain maintenant que Ramon était perdu dans la méditation, qu'il suivait une autre passion et qu'il s'étonnait qu'il y eût tant de monde à oser porter la croix en symbole et cérémonie quand alors tous avaient fui, quand dans la réalité quotidienne des choses, presque tous fuyaient encore et ne le savaient plus.⁴ (I am now certain that Ramon was lost in meditation, that he was engrossed in a separate passion of his own. I believe that he was astonished that so many people were ready to carry the Cross in symbol and in the liturgy, who fled from it in their daily lives. In the hard realities of everyday life, practically everyone flees the cross, and they keep on doing it and never know it).

Symbolic gestures can count for little when it comes to bearing more effective witness to one's beliefs. In fear of the Roman soldiers, Christ's followers did not jump to his aid. Even his friend and apostle, Peter, denied all knowledge of him. Ramon Rimaz, by sacrificing himself for love of another, carries his cross in an authentic manner. That the person whom he saves happens to be an atheist is intriguing. Could it be that he is more deserving of salvation than those who confine themselves to the external observance of their religion?

The spiritual itinerary of Rimaz is further developed in Strozzi, the evangelical priest of *Car je t'aime ô éternité*. His later life is devoted to the prostitutes of Pigalle. His presence among this marginalized group of women is the expression of a commitment to redressing inequality in ways encouraged by Vatican II. Not for Strozzi the lure of ecclesiastical honours which seduced Rimaz.

*Avec une mentalité pareille, il ne pourrait jamais devenir quelqu'un, ministre, évêque, on pourrait tout de suite s'en apercevoir.*⁵ (It was immediately clear that with a mentality like this he could never be anything, a Monsignor or a Bishop).

Rebellious by nature, he quickly perceived the difference between illusion and reality and he chose to align himself with those who most needed his help. The testimony of some of his friends underlines his 'other-worldliness'. One acquaintance says of him:

*Il me regarde de très loin, d'une autre rive.*⁶ (When he looks at me it's from afar, from another planet).

In spite of his ministry Strozzi refuses to preach to the prostitutes. They respect him because they feel that he loves them in a special way. According to Elisabeth:

*..j'avais la certitude...une sorte de bonheur tranquille, le sentiment d'être aimée.*⁷ (I was sure of being loved by someone: it brought me such a lovely peaceful feeling of happiness).

The knowledge of being loved for themselves, as they are, 'diseases and all', without any demand for reciprocity on Strozzi's part, helps this group of women to continue living and to maintain some sense of dignity. It convinces them that life is not just sordid, perverted and confused, but that it can be something more, something better. Elisabeth does not believe in God in any formal sense, yet she sees in Strozzi a special gift. Although she has never had any time for the

Church, the love which radiates from this fragile and charismatic priest makes her wonder:

*Il aimait tout le monde du même amour.. L'amour de Dieu, que voulez-vous que ça lui fasse, elle ne l'avait jamais vu, Dieu, quant à l'Eglise....*⁸ (He loved everybody in the same way. With the love of God for His people? How was she to know? She had never seen God. As for the Church....)

It is important to record that most of Sullivan's protagonists are based on people whom he knew. Cardinal Rimaz is based on Sullivan's ecclesiastical superior, Cardinal Roques, Archbishop of Rennes, who had given the culturally-active young priest his blessing to follow what appeared to be an incomprehensible vocation of priest and writer. Strozzi depicts Auguste Rossi, a priest-friend of the writer, who was engaged in academic endeavours up to the age of sixty, after which he decided to spend almost thirty years before his death administering to the street walkers of Pigalle. He appears in the famous novel by Gilbert Cesbron, *Les Saints vont en enfer* (1952), under the nickname, *le Père Pigalle*. There is a moving account, which is based on fact, towards the end of *Car je t'aime ô éternité*, of a visit by the author, with Strozzi, to an old woman's house. The woman, Arlette, is:

*squelettique, édentée, le visage noir de fumée, ratatinée comme une pomme gelée.*⁹ (like a skeleton, toothless, her face blackened by smoke, her skin shrivelled like a dried up apple).

But this description is followed by a transformation which dumbfounds the narrator. He is disgusted when he sees Strozzi kissing this pitiful old woman but then he sees a new dimension to her:

*Mais les yeux, je les vois tout à coup, lumineux d'enfant, levés vers le visage de l'homme. Il n'y a plus de laideur.*¹⁰ (But all of a sudden I see her eyes, shining like those of a child, as she lifted them towards the man's face. All ugliness was gone).

The love of Strozzi has changed everything, has brought life into dead eyes, beauty into an ugly face. When, in a subsequent novel by Sullivan, *Joie Errante* (1974), we discover that Strozzi is living with a woman and that he has slept with her:

*Deux est devenue un.*¹¹ (Two have become one)

we see it not as a capitulation, not as a concession to the flesh, but as the supreme act of charity. It is not lust which prompts this act. Strozzi realized that this woman needed physical proof of his love for her. He responded to her need; he gave himself willingly:

*Je n'ai jamais choisi de ma vie, j'ai répondu.*¹² (I have never made a conscious decision in my life. I have merely responded to God's call).

A comparison between Strozzi's sexual act and that of Scobie, the policeman-hero of Graham Greene's novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, is interesting. Each puts another's needs before his own. Each agrees to sleep with a woman for whom he feels no physical attraction. But whereas Scobie's adultery causes the reader to question whether he is a saint or simply a sinner, in Strozzi's case there is no such agonizing. The narrator notes:

*Ainsi apprenait-il qu'aimer autrui c'est aussi l'aimer dans sa singularité charnelle.*¹³ (In this way he learned that loving someone means loving them as individuals with all the reality of their flesh and blood).

This theology, which places charitable actions and being true to oneself ahead of principles and dogma, is what gives Sullivan's novels a unique place in contemporary French Christian writing. Both Rimaz and Strozzi choose a radical interpretation of Christ's message of love for God and for one's neighbour. Each realized, at a specific point in his life, that the way forward for the Church was in the rediscovery of its simple origins. Power, legalistic wranglings about sin, external observance, ritual and propaganda are not what religion should be about. This is why Sullivan sees in *Père Pigalle* the precursor of a liberation-type theology, freed from ideology and superficiality:

*Je le vois (Strozzi) sur le chemin de l'avenir...quand le monde chrétien se sera dégagé des légalismes, idéologies, c'est-à-dire de ses fausses richesses et des derniers lambeaux de puissance auxquels il s'accroche...quand les apôtres de ce temps ne s'épuisent plus dans les tâches vaines des conditionnements, qu'ils deviendront comestibles.*¹⁴ (I see him paving the way to the Church of the future, when the Christian world will free itself from the shackles of legalistic reasoning and ideologies and move away from its false riches and its pathetic clinging to the vestiges of power. In this new world the apostles will not wear themselves out in vain attempts to shape and condition people so that they can be swallowed up by an institution).

Henri Guillemin, in his book on Sullivan, pointed out a very distinctive aspect of his work when he wrote:

*Un homme qui écrit ce que tu écris est un gêneur.*¹⁵ (A man who writes what you write wants to disturb his readers).

This disturbing element seeks to shake us out of our passivity, to provoke us to think about issues that are complex and frightening. One result of his writing can be gauged through the number of readers, believers, agnostics and atheists, who wrote to the author to tell him that he had helped them to live through the chaos of modern life.¹⁶ He may have succeeded in bridging the gap between the traditional 'Catholic' literature of the thirties and the new wave of *littérature d'inspiration chrétienne* of which he is the most important exponent. He shares the prophetic strength of Bernanos but not his political allegiances. He has the same gift of delving into the psychological recesses of his protagonists as Mauriac but does not employ the same classical style. He should not in any case be placed in the same category as either because his inspiration and motivation are radically different. Out of a confusing political, social and religious scene in France he puts forward the thesis that experience is at least as important as ideas and that love is the most important factor in all personal conversion.

Whether we agree or disagree with his exposition of the Gospel message to a world in chaos, he makes us listen and he makes us think. He also disturbs us out of our smugness. He does not preach at us. He lets his 'people' talk for him. As a novelist he can do no more.

Notes

1. *The Sea Remains*, New York: Crossroads, 1989.
2. *Devance Tout Adieu*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, pp.153-154.
3. *Mais il y a la mer*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p.142.
4. *Ibid.*, p.260.
5. *Car je t'aime ô éternité*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p.18.
6. *Ibid.*, p.60.
7. *Ibid.*, p.107.
8. *Ibid.*, p.110.
9. *Ibid.*, p.197.
10. *Ibid.*, p.198.
11. *Joie Errante*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974, p.265.
12. *Ibid.*, p.266.
13. *Ibid.*, p.275.

14. Ibid., p.270-271.
15. Guillemin, *Sullivan ou la parole libératrice*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977, p.11.
16. Cf. *Rencontres avec Jean Sullivan*(3), Paris, Association des Amis de Jean Sullivan 1987.

CHARLOTTE

The tender blondness
which will conquer
many hearts

a Northern Throw-back,
Even now
your gap-toothed smile

senses
these coming
victories,

and dimples
a quickening tune
to which

your growing legs
shall one day dance
and spin away.

Peter Werner