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Overcoming Fear

Catholicism in the Work of Michael Harding

Eamon Maher

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Playwright, fiction writer, memoirist and Irish Times columnist, Michael Harding (1953-) is a well-known and celebrated figure in Irish literary circles. He first came to public attention as a dramatist towards the end of the 1980s and the early 90s, but it was really the publication of the much feted memoir, *Staring at Lakes*, in 2013, that consolidated Harding's appeal among the reading public. The raw honesty and self-deprecatory humour that characterise the account of his upbringing in rural Co. Cavan, the years of training and working as a priest (he left the priesthood 5 years after ordination, in 1985), his struggle with depression, his relationship with his mother, wife and daughter, allied to the wonderful interviews he did on radio and television, all contributed to Harding becoming a household name. He appears somewhat bemused at the celebrity status he now enjoys and, in typical Irish fashion, knows the pitfalls associated with fame: a pat on the back can quickly become a kick in the arse in this country.

I would have been aware of Michael Harding as a student in Maynooth College, where he appeared to be a somewhat cerebral, aloof figure when I encountered him occasionally going to or coming from H.Dip. lectures. It is a source of regret to me now that I never summoned up the courage to speak to him. I suppose this article is a type of belated dialogue, as it seeks to make readers of *Spirituality* aware of a text most of them will not have heard of, the short story collection *Priest*, which was published by The Blackstaff Press in 1986. One story, which will be the focal point of this piece, 'The Seminary', provides an insider's view of life as a seminarian in Maynooth in the 1970s.

The story begins with some of the views of fictional Fr George Skewer, a spiritual director for many years in the country's largest seminary, who ends up wondering how his destiny led him to where he is now:

A man who occupied his time talking to ghosts; an eighty-year-old bastard who slipped into priesthood on the false pretence that he was born in wedlock; he knew little or nothing about his beginnings, and approached his own death in a state of profound confusion. (p.35)

This description leaves us in no doubt about the lack of fulfilment and self-worth Fr Skewer feels about his present role on the margins of seminary life. He can see the enormous changes that have taken place in the institution where he has spent a number of decades, the appearance of lay students within the seminary walls, the more relaxed approach in the wake of Vatican II to wearing clerical garb and fol-

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lowing rules laid down by the Church blindly, the uncertainty about their vocation experienced among those training for the priesthood. Fr Skewer's confusion is well captured in the following passage:

If he met a seminarian at the gate, wearing a red shirt and denim jeans, or chatting intently to a young first arts girl, he looked the other way and preferred to remember what seminarians used to look like: lonesome figures, tortured faces, untypical of youth; all individuality submerged under the long dress-like black cassock. In his view, as it was and should be, in the making days of a priest. (p.36)

If we are to believe the report of the apostolic visitation set up in the wake of the Murphy Report by Pope Benedict, Father Skewer's view is the correct one. In 2012, one of the findings of the visitation team was that the formal segregation of seminarians from lay students was to be reinstated in Maynooth. The underlying premise for this action is that somehow interaction with those not studying for the priesthood (particularly women) might prove distracting to the life of prayer and reflection that should characterise life in a seminary. But one wonders what is to happen to newly ordained priests when they go to work in parishes, where the majority of those attending religious ceremonies will be women? Will donning the once again fashionable clerical attire somehow insulate them from temptation? Will their hypothetical consideration of the potential dangers posed by concupiscence in the seminary assist them in their future careers? Also, will spending time in an all-male environment help those of a homosexual orientation to live fulfilled celibate lives?

Harding's story dramatises the existential dilemma facing a number of young men as they attempt to reconcile their heterosexual or homosexual urges with the life of celibacy that awaits them once they emerge from Maynooth. One of the characters in 'The Seminary', 'the unkissed and lanky' Garry, struggles with doubt before he decides to try his luck in Maynooth. There is something less than reassuring about the reasons for this decision, as the lines below illustrate:

Garry in the Valley of Tears, at seventeen on the *via dolorosa*, confident only of a meagre pass in the Leaving exam; filling up an application form for the seminary, where he went in the autumn, buck teeth hidden behind the unkissed lips so deep and red, with rosary beads and a new soutane, to get away from it all. (p.39)

The desire 'to get away from it all' is hardly a good basis for a fulfilled life as a priest. Allied to this is the strong attraction that Garry feels for a lay student called David whom he meets at parties and in the library. The ambience in Maynooth is not quite what he expected it

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to be either: it was a period of change, a type of delayed 1960s was happening in Ireland: 'The time Garry became a nervous cleric, afraid of himself and the terrible soutane, who cried in the church the evening he was scolded by a priest in the cloister. The time a nation died of drink and changed its government as often as a whim took it, and when people stood up for decency in the letter columns of the papers.' (pp.39-40) A society in flux, a nation wondering where it was headed and what it stood for, a time of questioning and revolt—quite naturally, the Church was not sheltered from these transformations: 'The time priests ran off with young nuns, the desolate years of one hundred dozen students gallivanting and having their fling in the flats with the girls, or depressed on the floor with empty beer bottles and a stale smell the morning after.' (p.40) Note how there is no mention of senior figures in the college engaging in illicit sexual relationships with students. In fairness to Harding, 1986 was a time when there was nothing like the same knowledge of these activities as there is now.

Garry gains some degree of spiritual calm during the evenings spent sitting crosslegged in the garden of an American student listening to readings from the Gospel amidst guitar music and chanting, which he described to his spiritual director as a 'deep religious experience'. The contrast between those uplifting moments and the dull, repetitive ceremonies in the seminary plunge the young man once more into doubt and depression. Fr Skewer observed how few seminarians now visited the oratories for periods of private prayer. Many of them were out socialising or, like Garry, seeking solace from a personal God who seemed more present outside the walls of an oratory than inside.

When reading through this story, I could not fail to think back to the visit to the Gunn chapel in Maynooth by Pope John Paul II in 1979, a time when Harding would have been coming to the end of his formation. On arrival, the pontiff was greeted by the seminarians with the refrain: 'He's got the whole world/In his hands, he's got the whole world', a triumphalist chant that would have been more suited to a pop concert than to a religious occasion. The television pictures revealed that the Polish Pope was far from pleased with the greeting. In *Staring at Lakes*, Harding notes how, contrary to public perception at the time, 1979 represents a stark moment in the life of the Catholic Church in Ireland:

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In some ways, the papal visit was the funeral of Catholicism in Ireland. After the cheers of the assembled millions had died away and the sick and infirm who had waited too long in the drizzle at Knock had been returned to their homes and hospitals and hospices, Irish society found that it couldn't really stomach the

harsh tone of Rome's teachings and bit by bit went off to gorge and be lost in a frenzy of secular self-improvement. (pp.97-98)

Clearly, the Vatican was aware of the sharp fall in vocations and the increasing secularism of Irish society and it is most likely that John Paul's visit was an (ultimately failed) attempt to stem the tide. Many of the testimonies provided in Harding's short story underline the crisis being experienced by many in Maynooth at the time. For example, the final year student, Peter Maguire, describes the special treatment he receives when home on holidays from the seminary:

He assisted on the altar in his parish that Easter, and wore his black suit and collar everywhere. People would approach him at the church gate and shake his hand. At home his mother began fussing over him and telling his sisters to move from the chair and let him watch what he wanted on the television... And he felt good at last that something had come of his six years and his mother's prayers. (p.78)

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Peter perseveres, although it is clear that he has at best a sceptical view of religion and regularly doubts his suitability for the priesthood. His friend Mel Kavanagh falls by the wayside, however, because of an inability to accept the arid spiritual example that he sees ingrained in someone like Peter. The latter has nothing but disdain for his fellow seminarians, seeing them as misguided and inept. In an uncharacteristic outburst, Kavanagh exclaims:

'Y'see, most guys in here, I believe, are maligned, and if the truth were known, have a lot going for them. Because they have one thing you don't have, and it's called faith. That's your problem Peter ... you have no faith ... in God ... or people ... it makes no difference ... it's all the one. And true, I kept very quiet about it. I keep very quiet about a lot of things ... so that bastards like you won't be going around ... pontificating about it'. (p.86)

In all walks of life, people are forced to compromise in order to be able to endure their chosen profession. In the case of the priesthood, however, it must be very difficult to keep ministering the sacraments when you actually do not believe in their efficacy. Even more serious is when you cease believing in God, a plight I'm sure many priests have been forced to face. It is not clear whether or not Peter has faith. What can be said is that he knows he has chosen a path from which he finds it difficult to deviate. He finds the permanence of Maynooth attractive: 'Generations after he or Garry or anyone else there had failed to make sense of it, the college would still be a firm monument; brick on brick, austere and silent stone. You came as a boy, in search of truth; but all you got was a kind of secondary truth; the place had

truth and permanence; you had not; you were a leaf or a breath.’ (p.79)

In order to appreciate fully *Staring at Lakes, Priest* is an essential reference point. Every writer is inspired by her or his personal experiences. In the case of Michael Harding, a traditional Catholic upbringing and a spiritual nature predisposed him to choosing the priesthood as his preferred profession. It cannot have been easy to turn his back on all the hopes and expectation he and his family invested in his vocation. Leaving the priesthood is akin to the end of a marriage: it totally disrupts the natural rhythm of life, the habits that have become part and parcel of daily existence, the manner in which others view you and how you view yourself. One is left in the dark as to how Garry and Peter will fare after they leave the seminary, but there is at the very least a feeling that neither will last the pace, that they will in the end succumb to their true nature. But to make that move will require surmounting the fear that Harding believes made him cling to religion for so many years. As we read in *Staring at Lakes*:

It was fear. And it is fear. The dread inside that some disaster might befall me if I do not cling to something. The fear of death that lies at the root of all depression. And now maybe I was waking up. I was no longer a believer in anything. I was a writer. I was witnessing something and I would tell the tale. (p.280)

And how well Harding would tell his story, both in his fiction and his memoir, both of which combine to offer a most rewarding and challenging view of how Catholicism can mould, in positive and negative ways, a person's life view. One does not necessarily cease being a Catholic when one stops going to Mass and the sacraments: it has a much more deep-rooted hold on you than you might think. The work of Michael Harding proves that point.

The Homily

‘The homily cannot be a form of entertainment like those presented by the media, yet it does need to give life and meaning to the celebration. ... it should be brief and avoid taking on the semblance of a speech or a lecture. A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of faith.

[The liturgical] context demands that preaching should guide the assembly, and the preacher, to a life-changing communion with Christ in the Eucharist. This means that the words of the preacher must be measured, so that the Lord, more than the minister, will be the centre of attention.’ — Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n.138