

2015-06-08

Faith in our Fathers: can you Believe in Fictional Priests?

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ittbus>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maher, E. (2015, June, 8) Faith in our Fathers: can you Believe in Fictional Priests? *The Irish Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/faith-in-our-fathers-can-you-believe-in-fictional-priests-1.2241650>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Business and Humanities (Former ITT) at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

Faith in our fathers: can you believe in fictional priests?

Eamon Maher

Last Updated: Monday, June 8, 2015, 14:11

I was struck recently by an [article that appeared in the online section of the Irish Times \(November 14th, 2015\)](#). Written by a priest called Martin Boland, the piece was prompted by the publication of a novel by John Boyne, *A History of Loneliness*, which has as its main protagonist Fr Odran Yates, who is forced to live in an Ireland where the priest is more likely to be viewed as a paedophile or pariah than as a respected member of society. Clearly a novelist as disaffected as Boyne admits to being with the Catholic Church, would find it hard to be neutral in his depiction of priests, especially when some of the ones encountered in his novel are discovered to have been involved in child abuse. Boland begins his critique of Boyne's novel with the following warning:

Please pray for the novelist who attempts to create a priest character. He needs our prayers if he is to avoid resorting to hackneyed stereotypes or pantomime villain caricatures. The challenge, strewn with traps and pitfalls, is to portray a truly convincing priest, a man who lives out a deep interior reality.

While the priest can undoubtedly offer great possibilities for the novelist in terms of the potential drama of dealing with tortured souls or attempting to bring them spiritual succour, there is always a danger of presenting such a figure in a one-dimensional manner. To do the subject justice, the novelist must demonstrate an empathy with, and understanding of, the clerical function and a resolve not to falsify or embellish reality. Bad fiction is often the result of a lack of objectivity in the portrayal of characters or situations. Mauriac stated that the only characters that really interested him were the ones who assumed a life of their own and brought him in directions he had not envisaged. He confided in *Le Romancier et ses personnages*:

[...] a certain number of our creations are more alive than others. The majority are already dead and buried, lying totally forgotten in our memory banks. But there are others who manage to survive and continue to flit around in our heads as if they hadn't had their final say, as if they were waiting for us to allow them one last hurrah.

In this paper, I will attempt to tease out how successful portrayals of the priest in fiction avoid pious sentimentality and succeed in capturing the inner lives of men whose primary function is to administer the sacraments and lead people to God. I will start with some of the classic portrayals of the priest figure, then I will seek to explain how Irish fiction writers do not compare favourably with their international counterparts in their depiction of priests. We will follow a circular pattern by finishing with a discussion of John Boyne's recently published novel.

It seems appropriate to begin with Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), whose *Diary of a Country Priest* is widely considered as one of the great literary representations of a priest, the curé d'Ambricourt. Published in 1936, in the *entre-deux-guerres* period in France, Bernanos' *Diary* is remarkable for the way in which it allows readers to share in the anguish of the outwardly inept curé, who nevertheless manages to transform the lives of some of those to whom he ministers. His diary entries reveal that the young man is for the most part unaware of the impact he has on people like the comtesse, who is in revolt against God for the death (unjustified in her eyes) of her young son years previously. Through her cold indifference to her husband and daughter, the comtesse risks being separated from her son for all eternity, as is pointed out to her by the curé. 'Hell is not to love any more, madame', he states boldly. That a young priest should speak to her in this manner initially annoys, then shocks, the comtesse, whose only hope lay in the thought of being reunited with her son in heaven. At various stages in their heated altercation, she marvels at how the priest appears to see straight into her soul. Thinking back on the drama that occurred between them, Ambricourt reflects on how he was the unknowing instrument of divine grace:

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 (p.170).

A letter arrives from the comtesse later that evening expressing gratitude for the inner calm the acceptance of God's will has brought her. She writes:

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)

Madame la Comtesse dies that night and only the priest knows that she was at peace. Her daughter Chantal, the type of demonic child that only Bernanos could have created, listened to parts of what transpired between the two adults and mistakenly came to the conclusion that the priest was responsible for her mother's death. The curé cannot reveal what transpired between them, because to do so would be to betray a confidence. Hence he must endure the antipathy of the most influential family in the parish, as well as the dissatisfaction of his superiors.

At every turn, the curé's efforts to run his parish efficiently are frustrated. The star of his catechism class, Seraphita, tells him she only pretended to be interested in what he had to say because he had lovely eyes. We later discover that her friends

put her up to making this hurtful comment. The finances of Ambricourt get steadily worse, as local merchants trick the priest at every turn and other parishioners prove impervious to requests that they pay their dues. The priest's health deteriorates and he ends up only being able to eat bread dipped in wine (obvious symbols of the Eucharist), which fuels rumours that he is a drunkard. Among his clerical acquaintances, only the curé de Torcy recognises Ambricourt's strong inner life, but even he expresses frustration with how his young confrere can show so little mettle in dealing with his parishioners. Physical pain is matched by spiritual despair, as one diary entry illustrates: 'A void was behind me. And in front a wall, a wall of darkness' (103).

In its simplest terms, Ambricourt assumes the ennui at the heart of his parish and makes it his own. One could argue that the stomach cancer from which he dies is the price he pays for his work as a priest. He dies in the apartment of a former friend from the seminary, Dufréty, now living with a woman who has sacrificed everything to be with him. It is she who nurses Ambricourt during his last hours and it is noticeable that he does not judge her irregular relationship with Dufréty harshly: he sees that she is a victim of his friend's self-absorption. In spite of dying in a ramshackle apartment with only the spoiled priest to administer the last rites, one suspects that Ambricourt finds release from the pain, physical and spiritual, that had been wracking him for so long. His final words, 'Tout est grâce' (Grace is everywhere), indicate a resignation to the will of God in whom he places all his trust.

Bernanos' portrayal of Ambricourt's saintly qualities is all the more striking because of their being present in a human receptacle devoid of any obvious exceptional qualities. He would love to be an effective priest like his friend Torcy, but knows that his daunting vocation is to follow in the footsteps of Christ, 'the prisoner of His Agony in the Garden' (203). He experiences abandonment and despair before the joyful revelation of grace helps him across the threshold of death. For Bernanos, capturing the inner life of a priest was the ultimate challenge for a novelist and he was perhaps the most successful of all in his depictions of this intriguing figure.

The English novelist and convert to Catholicism, Graham Greene (1904-1991), was another who saw the priest as being core to his literary portrayal of Catholicism. *The Power and the Glory* (1940), published four years after Bernanos' *Diary*, is set in a South American country, probably Mexico, in which the Communist leadership have outlawed religion. One of the last surviving clerics in the country, a man who fathered a child with his former housekeeper, this alcoholic priest is forced to move around the country in order to escape arrest and execution. He is self-aware enough to know that he is unworthy of his calling: 'He was a bad priest, he knew it. They had a word for his kind - a whisky priest, but every failure dropped out of sight and mind: somewhere they accumulated in secret - the rubble of his failures'.

There is a part of him that would love to be caught, but it is his duty to avoid arrest so that he can minister to the few remaining Catholics in the country. Whereas Bernanos' priest is unduly harsh in his assessment of his faults, Greene's is not. He is a cowardly drunkard with a lascivious past and even his own daughter wants nothing to do with him, which prompts him to utter the following prayer: 'O God give me any kind of death - without contrition, in a state of sin - only save this child'. (82) Greene's writings reveal a fascination with the power of grace to inspire heroic acts in the most ordinary human beings. His whiskey priest and Scobie, the hero of *The Heart of the Matter*, are definitely sinners and yet one suspects that they might also end up being saints. Certainly, the whiskey priest's decision at the end of *The Power and the Glory* to return to the country from which he has just escaped to tend to the needs of an American criminal who has allegedly requested to see a priest, reveals an inability to turn his back on his vocation. His erstwhile companion, the half-caste, sets the trap in order to benefit from the reward on his head and still the priest heads off, resigned to his fate. He is then captured and imprisoned. Awaiting execution, he exudes a strange sense of calm: 'He felt only immense disappointment because he had to go to god empty-handed, with nothing done at all. [...] He knew now at the end that there was only one thing that counted - to be a saint.' (210)

Certain strange happenings after the priest's death reveal the impact he had on various people. For example, a young English girl, Coral, offered him protection for a while and died shortly afterwards in tragic circumstances. Her father remarks how she was affected by this encounter: 'But the odd thing is - the way she went on afterwards - as if he'd told her things' (214). Similarly, the young boy Luis, who was constantly irritated by his mother's insistence on reading from the lives of the saints, spits at his former hero, the lieutenant, after the priest's execution. The last lines of the novel see him opening the door to another priest seeking refuge in their house and kneeling to kiss the stranger's hand. Greene understood how ritual and a sense of community are highly treasured, especially among poorer people. Luis's father Juan remarks:

'You don't remember the time when the Church was here. I was a bad Catholic, but it meant - well, music, lights, a place where you could sit out of this heat - and for your mother, well, there was something for her to do' (51).

Without the priest, none of this is possible, which is what makes his role so unique and mysterious. Greene's presentation of the irruption of grace in the lives of his characters did not always meet with favour among certain critics who felt that a *deus ex machina* was sometimes employed in his works to redeem flawed characters like the whiskey priest. My own view is that Greene was shrewd in his handling of how grace operates and that he saw weak Catholics as sometimes benefiting from God's favour.

For our next example, we travel to Japan for a discussion of Shusaku Endo's (1923-1976) classic novel, *Silence*. Published in Japan in 1967, *Silence* recounts the perilous journey undertaken by two Portuguese Jesuits to land in Japan with the twin purpose of providing pastoral back-up to any Catholics who might be still living there and then to try and locate their former teacher at the seminary, Christovao Ferreira, who, it is rumoured, apostatised after enduring the torture of 'the pit.' In the

latter, priests and Christians apprehended by the Japanese authorities were subjected to the most horrific torture with a view to getting them to publicly recant their religious beliefs. Silence is narrated primarily through the letters and observations of one of the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, Sebastian Rodrigues, who arrives in Japan full of idealistic enthusiasm and ends up being captured and brought before the virulently anti-Christian Governor of Chikugo, Inoue.

On their way to the Japanese mainland the two missionaries had a stop-over in Macao, where they met up with Kichijiro, a drunken, despicable Japanese man whom they eventually take with them as their translator. What they fail to realize is that Kichijiro had apostatized before leaving Japan and will do so again when captured. Rodrigues remarks: 'But Christ did not die for the good and beautiful. It is easy enough to die for the good and beautiful; the hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt.' Kichijiro clearly belongs to the latter category. After their arrival, the realization slowly dawns on Rodrigues that Christianity does not really have the capacity to take root in the 'swamp' that is Japan. Even though there are many inhabitants who seem well-disposed to the Catholic faith, there is a sense in which they never fully embrace its true message or observe its main dogmas. Rodrigues experiences the real spiritual desert for the first time when he is forced to observe two local Christians, Mokichi and Ichizo, being swallowed up by the sea.

Rodrigues knows that the greatest sin against God is despair, 'but the silence of God was something I could not fathom' (117). Betrayed to the local samurai by Kichijiro, who reminds one of the treacherous half-caste in Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, Rodrigues will have ample opportunity to experience first-hand the desolate 'silence of God' as he awaits the trials ahead from his prison cell. Another thing that will plague Rodrigues is the thought that he might well have more in common with the wrecked and cowardly Kichijiro than he might like to think:

And then somehow or other the mouse-like face of Kichijiro, filled with terror, rose up in my imagination. Yes, that cowardly wretch who had trampled on the fumie at Nagasaki, and fled. Were I an ordinary Christian, and not a priest, would I have fled in the same way? What kept me going might be my self-respect and my priestly sense of duty (107).

Silence is a powerful exploration of the difficulties encountered when one's faith is put to the test in the most extreme manner possible. Doubts inevitably sink in and the idea of apostasy can seem both logical and attractive. Rodrigues appears to be holding firm initially but slowly he begins to show signs of weakness: 'Did God really exist? If not, how ludicrous was half of his life spent traversing the limitless seas to come and plant the tiny seed in this barren island!' (Silence, 223). Ferreira comes on the scene at this key moment and admits that he ended up denying God, not because of being suspended upside down over the pit, but because he saw the futility of his mission. According to him, 'Japan was a bottomless swamp. The sapling decayed at its roots and withered. Christianity was like this sapling: quite unperceived it had withered and died.' (Silence, 243) Exhausted and in despair, Rodrigues winds up trampling on the image of Christ: 'Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew.' (271)

Had the novel ended at this point, Rodrigues' mission would have been a failure. However, in the final pages, it is revealed that the Jesuit has the impression that the Christ on whose image he trampled told him to do so. He sees himself as a fallen priest, but then Kichijiro arrives at the abode that has been assigned to him by Inoue after his apostasy and asks him to hear his confession, which he does. By agreeing to this act of charity, Rodrigues casts doubt over the renunciation of his priesthood. His dialogue with the silent Christ is ongoing, the same Christ that was not so much silent, as suffering alongside him. The interrogation of God in the form of a dialogue is enlightening in relation to Endo's philosophy of grace, which is similar to Graham Greene's. The novel ends with the following reflection: 'Even now I am the last priest in this land. But Our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him.' (Silence, 298). The theology that Endo puts forward here is quite radical, namely that sin born out of love can lead to a higher sanctity.

Like Greene's whisky priest, Rodrigues is the conduit through which grace can be imparted to others and Silence is a novel that forces us to reflect on the mysterious ways in which god works on people. This was the experience of Endo himself as stated in an interview recorded in the magazine *Kumo*, in 1967:

I received baptism when I was a child... in other words, my Catholicism was a kind of ready-made suit... There were many times when I wanted to get rid of my Catholicism, but I was finally unable to do so. It is not just that I did not throw it off, but that I was unable to throw it off. The reason for this must be that it became part of me after all.

Rodrigues undergoes a similar epiphany and cannot stop being a priest just because he trampled on a sacred image. One can see that the attachment to Catholicism has deep roots, even in the swamp that was 17th-century Japan.

North America has produced many highly regarded Catholic novelists, chief among whom would be Flannery O'Connor and Mary Gordon. The two we have chosen for the purposes of this paper, Edwin O'Connor (1918-1968) and JF Powers (1917-1999), show much skill and discernment in their portrayal of priests. I will begin with Powers' comic masterpiece, *Morte D'Urban*, published in 1962, with the charming, worldly Father Urban as its hero. The depiction by Powers of this clerical figure demonstrates a capacity to see the loneliness and vulnerability behind a polished exterior. Fr Urban would appear to have it made: he is highly sought after as a speaker on the religious circuit, enjoys success in fundraising activities, is an affable golf companion and general bon viveur. Even his banishment by the order to a retreat house in Minnesota, when he had been expecting to be elected Provincial, does not stop Fr Urban, as he carries the Word of God to fishing lodges, private barbecues and golf courses across the state. As Powers' narrative develops, one can appreciate the factors that led this man to choose the path he did. Firstly, being a Catholic in America made him aware that he was in a minority, a minority that the Protestant majority viewed with a certain degree of suspicion:

What troubled them was the hocus-pocus that went on in Catholic churches. And Harvey Roche (the future Fr Urban), as a boy, didn't blame them. Wasn't it all very strange there, in that place, at that time, the fancy vestments, the Latin, the wine? What if Catholics were Protestants, and Protestants were Catholics, and they worshipped in such a manner? What would Catholics think?

Urban therefore makes the decision to adopt a liberal, Protestant type of approach to his pastoral duties. He finds comfortable ways of easing the conscience of those who come to him in confession and always has an eye to what will be well received by his audience when giving a retreat. Self-awareness emerges very slowly and in Urban's case, it comes about as a result of an unfortunate altercation with one of the order's main benefactors, who is in an irregular relationship with a woman called Sally, who strips down to her shoes and offers herself to him. This incident leaves the priest reeling and he flees from the castle in which he was a guest in order to find the sanctuary of the Hill, the Minnesota residence which, for all its backwardness and malfunctions, he has come to look on as home. Shortly afterwards, having been finally elected Provincial, Fr Urban is far less sure of the type of life he wants to live as a priest. The emptiness of an existence from which God was largely absent no longer appeals to him. Powers once said of priests: 'They are officially committed to both worlds in the way most people are not.' Fr Urban neglected his spiritual side until his conversion (epiphany is probably too strong a noun) towards the end of the novel. We are led to believe that subsequently he will spend more time in church and less on the golf course. There is no preachy tone employed by Powers in this novel, just a gentle nod in the direction of what truly matters in life.

With Edwin O'Connor's *The Edge of Sadness* (1961) we have a more serious consideration of the trials and tribulations of a diocesan priest, Fr Hugh Kennedy, a recovering alcoholic whose relationship with a prosperous Irish family, the Carmody, proves quite problematic. Fr Kennedy has been exiled to a disadvantaged inner-city parish after undergoing treatment for alcoholism. Prior to that, he had been serving in the comfortable Irish neighbourhood of St Raymond's. His current pastorate is reminiscent of the aforementioned Ambricourt: 'For what is really dreadful, what I find genuinely frightening, is the spreading, endless despair, hanging low like a blanket, never lifting, the fatal slow smog of the spirit.' In all likelihood, Kennedy's astute bishop realises that ministering in a place like this will serve to reinforce his priest's understanding of the spiritual needs of the marginalised, a group to which he had not had too much exposure in St Raymond's. The latter is where the Carmody family is based (in fact, one of the sons, John, replaced Kennedy as parish priest there).

Fr Kennedy is surprised one morning to see Charlie Carmody, the patriarch, among the congregation at Mass. He is there to invite the priest to his birthday party. Hugh agrees to go, somewhat hesitantly, and finds it quite daunting to be back among so many of his childhood friends and former parishioners. Shortly after the party, old Charlie falls ill and asks for Hugh to be sent to his room. Believing he is at death's door, he states his absolute trust in the sacraments and his belief he will die in a state of grace. Then he makes the following revelation: 'How can a man die happy if he knows that when he goes, he won't be missed by a single soul' (p352). He has somehow got it into his head that Hugh's late father may well have been the only one to have truly liked him. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. The priest's father actually held Charlie in utter contempt, as is summed up in his oft repeated description of the crooked businessman: 'As fine a man as ever robbed the helpless' (p.127). Hugh's dilemma is that as a priest he does not want to allow an old man to die in despair, which means embellishing the truth: 'I said the only thing it was possible to say and still remain a human being' (369). His words seem to appease Charlie, who, rather than ask his son or Hugh to hear his confession and administer the final rites, sends for a Franciscan to do the necessary. He then makes a remarkable recovery and no further mention is made of his conversation with Hugh.

Charlie is correct in believing that he is loved by nobody. John harbours huge resentment against his father for the 'reserves of misery' he heaped upon his wife and children. John is also experiencing doubts about his own ministry, finding it hard to love his parishioners. He accuses Hugh of being a misanthrope also, saying: 'I may have turned my back on my parish, but you've never even turned your face on yours. You don't even know it's there' (594). This strained exchange is the last one the two priests will have, as Fr John dies unexpectedly shortly afterwards. The novel ends with Hugh declining the Bishop's offer that he return to St Raymond's so that he might open up to the parishioners of St Paul's and, 'find my way not again to the simple engagement of the heart and affections, but to the Richness, the Mercy, the immeasurable Love of God' (637). There is much to admire in O'Connor's engagement with the difficulties at the heart of priesthood. Of particular interest is the novel's grappling with the workings of grace, which can be bestowed on someone as unworthy as Charlie Carmody in the same way as on a virtuous person. James Silas Rogers summarises the spiritual resonance of the novel thus:

It suggests a less quantifiable, more expansive, and in some ways more mysterious spiritual experience, in which flawed and failed humans can nonetheless point others to redemption – in which an ultimately supernatural healing can flow from the personal presence and the candor of committed friends.

From this brief discussion of the more accomplished treatment of priests in world literature, we now come back to Ireland with a view to explaining why the achievements of Bernanos, Greene, Endo, Powers and O'Connor were never really matched by their Irish counterparts. Priests are very visible in Irish fiction, as is understandable in light of the central role Catholicism has played in the history of the country. Peter Connolly, a priest and former Professor of English in Maynooth College, in an article published in *The Furrow* in 1958, observed that the serious writer is often ahead of his time and brings to expression feelings and thoughts lying dormant and unformulated all around him. 'Conversely', he continued, 'imaginative writing will affect or mould the people's consciousness of their priests in so far as it reaches the (limited) reading public of the novel and short story and the much wider public of the drama.' Canon Sheehan, James Joyce, Frank O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty, Kate O'Brien, Francis McManus, Edna O'Brien, Mary Lavin, William Trevor, Anne Enright,

Pádraig Standún (to whom we will return in due course) and a host of other Irish writers of fiction featured priests in their novels and short stories. But in general, they were there almost as stock figures whose role was generally to lay down the law as the Church understood it, to keep the people subjugated and unquestioning of the Church's authority (Liam O'Flaherty's *Skerrett*, first published in 1932, is a good example of this type of stereotype), and to generally ensure that dues are paid and parishes run in an efficient manner. What is commonly lacking in these depictions is an understanding of the inner life of a priest, his struggles with sexuality, his doubts, his devotion to prayer, his understanding of God's message as it pertains to him and those to whom he ministers.

For the rest of this paper, I am going to deal very briefly with certain works by Irish writers of fiction where the priest is at the heart of the narrative. I will begin with George Moore's *The Lake*, which marks a departure in Irish literature in its portrayal of a priest, Fr Gogarty, who undergoes a psychological awakening which causes him to lose his faith. This crisis results from his relationship with a teacher, Nora Glynn, whom he denounced from the pulpit and for whom he unknowingly harboured feelings of love. The form of Catholicism one encounters in *The Lake*, published in 1905, is one which bears all the hallmarks of Moore's own unbelief. In a letter to his brother Maurice, around the time he was composing *The Lake*, Moore made the following observation: 'One writes badly when one is in a passion; no one knows that better than I do.' Moore was annoyed by his brother's religiosity, which he associated with ignorance and lack of sophistication. In the same correspondence, brought to light by Conor Montague, Moore belittled Maurice's religious beliefs in the following manner:

Agnosticism is not so infallible for the production of good literature as Catholicism is for the production of bad. You write like an angel, that I can see; you tell me you have nothing to say – well, Catholics never have, here or elsewhere – they are a silent lot.

Comments like the above betray a lack of objectivity, which, when transferred to the genre of fiction, can have less than satisfactory results. In many ways, Fr Gogarty is a rather obvious mouthpiece for some of Moore's own views. After Nora left the parish in disgrace, Gogarty reflects on his true feelings for her and sees that he 'wanted her body as well as her soul' (121). In one of the many letters he writes her, he reveals how his training in Maynooth seminary taught him 'to despise women' (129), but that he was now determined to follow a different path: 'God gave us our human nature; we may misuse and degrade our nature, but we must never forget that it came originally from God' (p.129). He becomes increasingly fascinated by nature and associates Nora with the sun and the spring-tide. His quest, he discovers, is not so much Nora Glynn as the inner life he has discovered through the feelings she has aroused in him. He comes to view the Mass as 'a mere Latin formula' and sees his quest as 'that intimate exaltation that comes to him that has striven to be himself, and nothing but himself' (175). While a most interesting novel in many ways, the main problem with *The Lake* is precisely the fault that Moore tried to warn his brother Maurice about, namely writing when in a passion. Moore was intent on putting forward a secular, enlightened priest who ends up leaving his parish by simulating a suicide and heading to a more enlightened society beyond the shores of Ireland. Peter Connolly is correct in his assessment that Moore and Joyce 'rejected the dogmatic and moral system of the Church in the name of the artist's search for freedom, but to a surprising extent they were obsessed with the priest as a personification of it all'. The problem is to avoid making the clerical characters into fictional incarnations of the writers' own views and theories, which appears to be the case with Moore's Fr Gogarty in *The Lake*.

Richard Power's *The Hungry Grass* (1969) is a sympathetic account of the last year in the life of a parish priest, Fr Tom Conroy, who ministers in the west of Ireland. The novel enjoyed a good critical reaction when it was first published in 1969. It presents Fr Conroy as a strong-willed, forceful administrator of the parish of Rosnagree; he is feared and respected in equal measure by the other priests in the diocese, who recognise his deep spirituality and intellectual prowess. Conroy found himself in Maynooth somewhat by chance when his older brother Frank left the seminary and came home to take over the family farm. Tom proves very adept academically, but an inability to tow the party line will prevent him from making much headway in the Church.

Shortly after news of Fr Conroy's death spreads around the parish, it is discovered that a wealthy local farmer has bought the graveyard plot next to the priest's, which prompts Fr O'Leary to comment: 'No one around here would pay a bob extra unless they felt Conroy had some ... some remarkable qualities.' The gravedigger makes a similarly enigmatic comment to Fr Mahon, the executor of Conroy's will: 'The kind he (Conroy) was, Father, he'd see a pain inside you' (20). An ability to bring healing to those in pain, to work tirelessly for the less fortunate members of his parish, to give of his time willingly to tend to the spiritual needs of his flock, these are the qualities that earn for Fr Conroy a special place in the hearts of his parishioners.

He is not without faults, however. He has a fractious relationship with his mother and finds it hard to accept his brother Owen's decision to leave home to make a life for himself and his sweetheart in London. He treats his young curate Farrell with a certain amount of disdain, especially with regard to his new-fangled approach to clerical practice. He is impatient and intolerant at times, unyielding in matters of principle, and lacking in charity. Nevertheless, something in the demeanour of the congregation when Fr O'Hara is saying the Rosary over Conroy's coffin, causes him to reflect on the legacy of the man who has just died: 'A true priest is never loved.' Someone - Bernanos was it? - had said. The syllogism formed itself before he could stop it. 'Father Conroy was loved. Ergo, he was not a true priest.' His tricks of logic often disconcerted him and now he shrugged the conclusion aside to join in the prayers' (18).

The mundane daily pattern of priests can occasionally disguise some remarkable qualities that leave their mark. The tide that flows between priest and people, and between priests themselves, is well captured by Power's intriguing account of the inner struggles and ultimate victory of Fr Conroy, maverick priest and sensitive pastor. The last lines of the novel describe Conroy

getting out of his car to join his fellow-priests, 'with an eagerness he had never known, not even when he drank the wine and broke the bread of life.' (255). His life is in many ways a concrete manifestation of the quote from Cardinal Newman that is provided at the beginning of the novel: 'We are not angels from Heaven that speak to you, but men, whom grace, and grace alone, has made to differ from you'.

The evolution of Irish society from 1969, when *The Hungry Grass* was first published, through to the present time, has clearly had an impact on how the priest is perceived in general and hence on how he is portrayed in literature. Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979, while a success in terms of the crowds that turned out to see him at the various venues around the country, was prompted by the striking decline in vocations and the increasingly secular attitudes that were developing in Ireland around that time. Divisive referenda on divorce and abortion in the 1980s showed that the Catholic Church's previous moral authority was becoming frayed at the edges. Tom Inglis captures this change very well:

The criterion of a good Irish Catholic has traditionally been perceived as one who received the sacraments regularly and who followed as well as possible the rules and regulations of the Church. Innocence was regarded as a virtue. People were not encouraged to question their religion or their priests. The appropriate responses to any questions one might have about religion were learnt off by heart in the catechism. [...] Irish Catholics have not developed an intellectual interest in, or critical attitude towards, their religion.

Clearly, such a view of Catholic observance has long fallen into abeyance, as most Irish people no longer defer to the Church when reaching moral decisions, especially in the sexual domain, where it has to be said that the reputation of the Church has been very tarnished by the clerical abuse scandals. Increasingly, priests are now being obliged to work in parishes where severely depleted numbers and an aging profile make it difficult to meet all the demands that are placed upon them. And they also suffer from an inability to effect change from the bottom up, as they struggle with bishops and cardinals who seem unable to plan for a much changed religious landscape in Ireland. In this respect, the novels (published in Irish and English) of Pádraig Standún, an ordained priest who has worked for many years in the west of Ireland, bring into focus some of the issues that currently confront Irish priests. *Lovers and Celibates*, the Irish editions of which were published in 1983 and 1991 respectively, both deal with the issue of celibacy. In *Lovers*, Fr Tom Connor discovers that his housekeeper cum live-in lover is pregnant with his child. Not wanting to leave the priesthood or put an end to the relationship with this woman, the priest tries to convince his bishop that he might continue in ministry. That does not prove feasible, however, and in the end he finds himself obliged to leave the parish house to make way for his successor. Prior to making this decision, the bishop asked his secretary to visit the parish to ascertain what the people made of this scandal. Opinion was divided, with some liking Connor's easy-going approach and insistence that God will forgive anything. This does not wash with the elderly Jack Jennings, though, who says: 'All his talk was about a merciful God. You would think there was no devil at all. We will need a strong old-fashioned priest to bring back the faith in this place – no easy task' (p.158).

In *Celibates*, Fr Pat Barrett wants to remain a priest but also marry Teresa Carter and be a father to her daughter. Unable to get the decision he wants from Rome, Barrett decides to go on hunger strike. His bishop visits to explain that there are thousands of priests living by the rules and trying to live chaste celibate lives. He admits that not everything is perfect: 'It is after all a human, sinful church,' he says (115). Indeed it is and Standún provides an insider's view of some of the turmoil associated with dealing with the human failings that one finds among priests and the institution to which they are aligned, for better or worse.

Which brings us back from whence we started, John Boyne's *A History of Loneliness* and Fr Odran Yates, a man who could not be described as a monster; he is merely an institutionalised and not overly courageous man. His inability to confront the reality that one of his seminary friends, Tom Cardle, is a paedophile priest, has disastrous consequences for his nephew, whom Cardle abuses. To the observation 'and who, in 1980, ever had cause to distrust a priest?', one must reply that it is your duty to be vigilant, especially when you have the type of knowledge of a person's failings that Yates had of Cardle. People become institutionalised and often buy into clericalism and groupthink. Yates was always keen to enter the priesthood:

The fact is that I was a believer. I believed in God, in the Church, in the power of Christianity to promote a better world. I believed that the priesthood was a noble calling, a profession filled by decent men who wanted to propagate kindness and charity. I believed that the Lord had chosen me for a reason. I didn't have to search for this faith, it was simply a part of me. And I thought that it would never change. (146)

But change it did, and not for the better. Moved from the comfortable surrounds of Terenure College and its successful rugby teams to work in a parish, Fr Yates slowly comes round to the view that 'To be among crowds while wearing my collar could be a demoralizing experience' (168). By now the revelations of clerical sex abuse have made of all priests potential paedophiles in the eyes of the public. As a young boy, Odran Yates had been abused himself by a priest who had been asked into their house by the child's mother, worried that the attraction he was feeling for a young girl in the neighbourhood might pose a threat to his vocation. Yates unsuccessfully struggled to erase the abuse from his memory: 'There he was; he was standing next to me now, his foul breath in my ear, his arm around my shoulder, pulling me to him, his hands tugging at my pants, reaching inside. I pressed my hands against my ears. He was there. He was all over me' (298). The powerlessness of the young boy to reveal this abuse to anyone – his pious mother would in all likelihood not have believed him – is matched by Yates' failure as an adult to share his suspicions about Tom Cardle whom he collects on his release from prison. Cardle blames the training in Clonliffe seminary for imbuing in him a feeling of unworthiness: 'They told me everything that made me human was shameful and dirty', he says (373). He does not spare his friend either,

telling him that he knew it was not wise to allow Cardle to stay in his sister's house the night of his mother's funeral, where he would have access to the unsuspecting nephew. He continues:

You knew it, you kept it secret and this whole conspiracy that everyone talks about, the one that goes to the top of the Church, well it goes to the bottom of it too, to the nobodies like you, to the fella that never even had a parish of his own and hides away from the world, afraid to be spotted. You can blame me all you like, Odhran, and you'd be right to, because I've done some terrible things in my life. But do you ever think of taking a look at yourself? At your own actions? At the Grand Silence that you've maintained from the very first day? (377)

These lines resemble a public pronouncement on the part of the novelist more than a realistic exchange between the two priests. While *A History of Loneliness* undoubtedly contains certain memorable passages and effective dramatic scenarios, I would have to agree with Martin Boland's contention that Fr Odhran is 'a secular invention': 'He persists as a sociological conceit that provides a convenient literary peg onto which Boyne can hang his case for the prosecution'. Yates has no obvious interior life and he never appears to celebrate Mass or to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Boland concludes: 'All the talk is about popes, bishops and priests; Jesus Christ barely gets a mention. Fr Odhran Yates is in fact Godless'.

So what does this short discussion of the clerical figure in modern literature tell us about the Irish situation in particular? Well, firstly the fictional representations of the priest by Irish writers fails to develop a literary medium capable of conveying some of the unseen and therefore largely unappreciated aspects of a priest's inner life. A writer like Bernanos can illuminate the experience of being a priest from within by dwelling on typical themes like the hardship of ministering in a largely Godless milieu, or the sense of not being really of the world while still having to relate to people who are firmly implanted in it, the power that comes from administering the sacraments, the despair at having to endure the silence of God and the joy when His presence is revealed. In Peter Connolly's view, the great Catholic novelists are the ones who succeed in making the priest somehow efface the cleric and who allow the action of Grace to insinuate itself within the text in an unforced, natural way. Perhaps now that Ireland has to all intents and purposes become a post-Catholic country and the priest a far less powerful authoritarian figure, the necessary conditions may exist to inspire novelists to re-evaluate the role of the priest in the lives of those to whom he is called to minister. I certainly hope so.

*This is the text of a lecture, *Life in a Roman collar: Some clerical figures in modern fiction*, given on April 28th by Dr Eamon Maher, of the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, at the Central Catholic Library, Merrion Square, Dublin 2.*

© 2015 irishtimes.com