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Why Such an Interest in Priests?*

Eamon Maher

The writer is currently co-editing a book with Eugene O'Brien entitled *From Galway to Cloyne, and Beyond: Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism*. He is Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies in IT Tallaght, Dublin.

Before dealing with any more representations of the priest in modern literature, I thought it might be useful to share some personal experiences which give a context to the origin and inspiration of this series.

My engagement with Catholicism was pretty typical for someone of my generation. Our family home in Roscrea (North Tipperary) is situated opposite the curate's house and, as someone who spent a few years in Maynooth National Seminary before ill health forced him to leave the seminary, Dad had many friends and acquaintances among the diocesan clergy. Also, as a teacher in Cistercian College Roscrea, he developed a huge respect for the monastic tradition. And then there was my uncle John, Dad's brother, who was a priest in Montana, which meant we had close family connections with the priesthood. So much so that I was accustomed to priests being in our house regularly on social visits, to play cards or just to chat. I frequently kissed the ring of the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr Tom Morris, who was a regular visitor and a close friend of Dad's from Maynooth, or of the various Abbots from the monastery. Tom Morris had been in Rome for the second Vatican Council and he was someone whose views mirrored many of my father's.

In my teens, I was drafted into the clerical golf fourball on Wednesday afternoons. I was more acceptable than my older brother, as I was less likely to throw clubs after a bad shot, or to voice controversial opinions about confession or obligatory attendance at Sunday Mass. The idea of a vocation fleetingly crossed my mind, but it was never a strong preoccupation. Still, the life of a priest during the 1960s and 70s did not strike me as being unenviable. They had respect, a reasonable salary and a good network of family and friends who supported them.

Thinking back on my youth, I realise I would have been an ideal candidate for grooming by any potential paedophiles among the clergy. If anything untoward had ever happened to me on my various assignments as an altar boy, for example, it is doubtful that I would have been able to share it with my parents, such was the reverence in which they held the priestly function. But I have to say that I never felt even slightly uncomfortable in the company of priests. If anything, a number of them are among my best friends and my heart goes out to them about the changed circumstances in which they now find themselves. Forced to work well into old age in parishes where operatives are in scarce supply, demoralised by the clerical abuse scandals, in which a small minority caused huge upheaval for the ordinary decent

* In a series of articles in *Spirituality*, Eamon Maher has been examining the role of the Catholic priest in literature. This article is a kind of reflective pause. — Editor

men who carry out their duties in a selfless manner in spite of all the obstacles placed in their way, things are far from rosy for the diocesan clergy at the moment. (I should add that it is not much different for the Religious Orders, but at least they still have some semblance of a community life). It doesn't help that the bishops and cardinals seem to have little or no vision when it comes to planning for the future. One of the founding members of the Association of Priests of Ireland, Brendan Hoban, describes the predicament in which he and other priests find themselves thus:

In present circumstances, disenchantment among diocesan priests in Ireland is predictable, understandable, even inevitable, given the accumulated wreckage of the last few decades: paedophile scandals, failures of Church leadership, vocations in free-fall, haemorrhaging of our congregations; rising age-levels of priests; the ever-increasing demands of our people; the perception of an anti-Church media bias; and, not least, the feeling that we have become endless and usually disparaging news.²

One can feel the pain and disappointment that making such observations causes this priest, a man who has dedicated all his adult life to the priestly ministry. The average age of priests in Ireland is currently sixty-five, a stark statistic that forms the basis of a recent book by Hoban entitled *Who Will Break the Bread for Us?*³ Already the crisis is taking root. In the small parish in Meath where I attend Mass, there is just the parish priest to administer the sacraments, where formerly there was also a curate. This situation is replicated all around the country. And yet the demands on the priest's time have, if anything, increased. There are still baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, weddings and funerals to be organised, visits to hospitals and to the homes of the elderly to be carried out. It is no surprise that priests' golf handicaps have increased in recent times – they have very little time for leisure activities!

When one considers the negative impact the clerical abuse scandals have had on the perception of the Catholic Church in Ireland, it should be pointed out that the standing of the priests working on the ground has not really diminished in any perceptible way. The reason for this is quite simple: people are able to differentiate between a hierarchical organisation in which group-think and a desire to preserve the good name of the institution at all costs took precedence over the safety of children, and the decency of those men who continue their work on the ground in a quiet, efficient manner. When tragedy visits a household, regardless of the religious beliefs of the family members, it is often the local priest who is the first on the scene to offer his condolences

2. Brendan Hoban, 'Disenchanted Evenings: The Mood of Irish Diocesan Clergy', in *The Furrow* 64 (November 2013), pp. 604-19.

3. Brendan Hoban, *Who Will Break the Bread for Us?* (Ballina: Banley House, 2013).

and support. I have attended many poignant funeral services in recent years and have marvelled at the manner in which the priests handle the pain, and sometimes anger, of the congregation in a sensitive and caring manner. There is never a false note, never a rush to judgement, in the case of suicide for example, which is becoming so much more commonplace, particularly among young people. The emphasis tends to be on the unconditional compassion of God and the ultimate hope the thought of the resurrection brings to those left behind.

In recent years, I have had cause to appreciate first hand just how skilled priests are when dealing with bereavement. In 2014, my brother Gerry passed away during a visit to New York where he was visiting his daughter and granddaughter. The heart rupture that caused his death occurred a few days before his 59th birthday. I had the unenviable task of breaking the news to my mother (then aged 88) that her 'rock', the person on whom she depended for so many of her daily needs, was no longer with us. I thought the shock would kill her. But it didn't, and I attribute the remarkable resilience she demonstrated at this awful time to her strong faith. The day after Gerry's passing, we went to Mass in the monastery, not knowing that the monks had decided to offer their Sunday Mass for the repose of Gerry's soul – like Dad, Gerry taught for many years in Cistercian College Roscrea and was a past student also. Afterwards in the car park, we were told that a few of the monks wanted to speak to Mum. We went back into the church and Mum shared her anxiety about what would happen to her son in the next life, as he had not always been as assiduous as he might have been in terms of practicing. A former abbot, since then gone to his just reward, said: 'Maisie, were you not listening to the Gospel message today. It was all about the mercy of God and the importance of good deeds. Gerry was really good to you, wasn't he? Do you not think that God knows that?' I would have loved to kiss that good man for the reassurance these comments brought to my mother.

The funeral Mass in Roscrea the following weekend was a special occasion. Whereas Gerry could not have been described as overly religious, he did have great respect for local tradition and would have known that a Catholic service was the only one that would have been appropriate in the situation. Once more, the curate from across the road was a tower of strength. He met Gerry's children and discussed how they wanted things done. He said a few lovely words about Gerry at the start of the Mass and then allowed Ciara, the eldest child, to wrap things up with an appreciation of her Dad. It was a heartbreakingly beautiful occasion, the sort of thing that we do best in the Catholic tradition. My kids asked me afterwards why weekly Mass cannot be like that. It struck me as significant that the children appreciated the

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beauty of the liturgy, how the music, readings, prayers of the faithful, eulogy all combined to celebrate the life of their uncle. I know that all Masses cannot have the lofty grandeur of a funeral Mass, but it's a great pity that many are so far removed from the daily experience of people, and of young people in particular.

Losing someone close to you brings your faith into sharp focus. What lies beyond the threshold of death? Will God be there to accompany us on the journey into the vast recesses of eternity? Will we be reunited with our loved ones who have gone before us? I must admit to harbouring a certain apprehension about death: its finality disturbs me, the way it wipes out a human life and leaves behind a gaping void. I had many interesting conversations with my father about the afterlife. As far as he was concerned, Heaven is a state where one has the certainty of being in the presence of the Godhead, a certainty that brings with it a deep peace and happiness that can never be found on earth. That's all well and good, but what about the joy of living in the presence of family and loved ones? What about the wrench of separation from the beauty of nature, the changing seasons, the pleasure of seeing your children and grandchildren make their way in the world. Dad died at 82 and his 10th anniversary took place in June 2015. He was not afraid of death and I take succour from that fact.

I am also encouraged by the knowledge that when my life is approaching its end I will have a priest or priests around to help me on my way. One of these will be the French priest and writer Jean Sullivan, who died in 1980 and who has been a constant source of inspiration to me down through the years.⁴ I translated into English the memoir he wrote describing the life and death of his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, which is an unadorned, raw and honest account of the devastation the death of a loved one can have on a person. Towards the end of the memoir, we read the following lines:

I am now the son of nobody. I will have to go alone now, mother, like an adult, towards my maker. You were a sign that He existed; I knew through you of His presence. But I was probably too close to you to recognise what was happening. Now that you are gone, mother, there is nothing else between me and death, that is to say between me and God. Alleluia.⁵

God and death are synonymous according to Sullivan, so maybe we should stop fearing it and start embracing it. Engagement with religion is not a simple thing. It requires commitment and tolerance, patience and fortitude. Priests are there as intermediaries between us and God. They are not without fault (what human is?), but in my experience the vast majority of them are admirable human beings that dedicate

themselves to their ministry in an commendable manner. As a teacher, I worked with Jesuits in Clongowes Wood College for 12 years. I admired their learning and the way they could accommodate radicals and conservatives within their ranks – I had the privilege of interviewing Peter McVerry, a past student of Clongowes, as part of research I was carrying out on marginality. He is someone whose work and persona I admire hugely. When I get mad with the Church, especially in relation to its teaching on homosexuality, or its poor handling of the clerical abuse scandals, or its recent stance on the recent referendum of same sex marriages, it is always salutary to reflect on the many good priests like Peter McVerry whose commitment to the less fortunate members of society, to those who have lost loved ones in tragic circumstances, to those in pain because of neglect or bullying, is nothing less than exceptional. Is it any wonder that the figure of the priest in literature holds such a fascination for me?

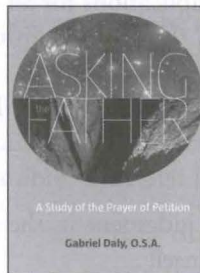
The last lines of John A Weafer's recent study of the lived experience of the diocesan clergy provides a good summation of my personal experience of priests and explains why they interest me to the extent that they do:

Above all, they want to be priests and they are willing to accept most restrictions placed on their lives by celibacy, obedience, and their commitment to Christian service in a clerical 'grey zone', with few of the certainties of the pre-Vatican II Church. They believe they have been called by God to be priests, and, for most of them, it is probably the best job in the world.⁶

My father did me a great service by exposing me to a group of men who live primarily for others and who are a real source of succour in times of need.

Oh, and by the way, the next instalment of the series will deal with Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*.

6. John A. Weafer, *Thirty-Three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2014), p.223



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