Rendering that Darkness at the Heart of Priesthood: The Strangled Impulse by William King

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William King is one of the generation of post-Vatican II priests who emerged from the seminaries in the 1970s, full of enthusiasm for what was happening in the Catholic Church and anxious to make their mark in parishes throughout the country. Often, the reality they faced on the ground was totally different to what they had been trained to cope with in the course of their training. People were becoming less deferential to priests and were beginning to make up their own minds about matters of conscience. Certain married couples, for instance, became estranged from the volte face by Paul VI in relation to family planning, outlined in the encyclical Humanae Vitae, which still is the document that encapsulates the Church’s reasons for the ban on artificial contraception. At the time, the difficulties caused by this interdiction was something which priests had to deal with in parishes and I am sure that there were many instances in the confessional where their natural instinct prevailed over official Church teaching.

The 1960s had seen a significant reduction in the number of young men going on for the priesthood, a trend that continued into the 1970s. It is likely that Pope Saint John Paul II’s visit to Ireland in 1979 was an attempt to stem the tide and restore Ireland’s remarkable devotion to Catholicism. Ultimately, however, the die was cast and, instead of renewal, the decades since that time have been marked by increased secularism and a strong rejection by many, and indifference by more, in relation to Church teaching.

William King, therefore, has lived and worked as a priest during a period of great turmoil and socio-religious change. First published in 1997, The Strangled Impulse was, in the words of the author, ‘an attempt to render that darkness at the heart of the priesthood.’ It achieves that goal with all the knowledge, tenderness and, at times, frustration felt by the insider. In the Afterword to the 2014 edition of the novel, King outlined the hopes and aspirations of his generation of priests:

We were young, idealistic and eager to shatter the image of the staid generation of priests who had gone before us. We would be among the first out on the dance floor at wedding receptions. We wore jeans, long hair (oh happy days!) and played guitars. We came ‘trailing clouds of glory’ – or so we thought. In hindsight, we were decidedly naïve. (187)

Naïve they may have been, but I know a number of priests of the generation King describes, and they have always impressed me with their tolerance, their pastoral zeal, their genuine desire to share power
with the laity, their commitment to a flat managerial model of Church which would be truly the 'People of God'. Their idealism may have been dented, but it is still visible in the enthusiasm they display for their pastoral and sacramental role within the Church.

A priest who decides to write a novel about another priest always risks the accusation of transposing his own experiences into fiction. But in a sense, that is what all novelists do. Having worked his adult life in various parishes in the Dublin Archdiocese, William King, like his fictional alter ego, Fr Brian O'Neill, may well have felt the same type of disquiet at being moved (without any consultation) from a location where he was comfortable, to minister in a parish which one could describe as 'rough' and where the people are poorer and less supportive of their priests. Similarly, he would be very aware of the type of clerical gossiping that characterise the conversation of Fr O'Neill and his golfing companions during and after their Thursday fourball in Royal Dublin or Portmarnock. Who was being moved where and why? Who were the likely men to be appointed Bishops or who was to be sent to Rome? His friend and mentor, Tim Sheridan, parish priest of Brian's first parish of Beechwood, is not given to idle conversation, but when he speaks, his words have the ring of authenticity. He notes what a strange thing a vocation to the priesthood is: 'Who nowadays would give up what is probably the most powerful urge of all? And on top of that we rely on the charity of the people for maintenance. Maybe there's a lot we don't give ourselves credit for.' (33) In Melrose, the place where he is sent by his bishop, Brian will see first-hand what real sacrifices he has made to pursue his priestly vocation. Life is far from simple in this cultural and religious wasteland. His predecessor could not wait to leave and his colleagues, the autocratic parish priest, Fr Leo Brannigan, and the sycophantic, two-faced curate, Fr Dick Hegarty, do not offer him any succour as he struggles to come to terms with the new situation.

To add to his discomfort, his priest-friend Paul reveals details of his blossoming affair with a nurse in the hospital where he is working as chaplain. Paul is very concerned that his new girlfriend may be pregnant, which prompts Brian to ask why they would take that risk when there are contraceptives freely available. Paul's response is revealing: 'I couldn't. No. That would be too … No, you don't shake off seven years in Maynooth that quickly.' (53) One is led to believe from this comment that Paul is of the view than using contraception would be as bad, even worse, than breaking his vow of celibacy. We discover that his mother was very instrumental in nurturing Paul's vocation:

He was angry at the way he had been steered into the seminary.
Angry at a mother who had sent him on an annual fishing holiday with her brother, the Monsignor, a vicar general in California. 'I was the one that was fucking hooked.' His regret dissolved in laughter at his own quip. (55)

When Paul leaves the priesthood to start a new life with his girlfriend, Brian finds himself slipping into an unrelenting routine of seemingly irrelevant visitations to people in the parish, of listening to his parish priest rabbling on about finances, of long evenings spent on his own with only a bottle of whiskey for company. King is astute at describing the loneliness of life in the presbytery, cut off from a normal family life, always on call when parishioners need a priest, but with no one to turn to when one finds oneself in a state of despair. It is not altogether a surprise then that he should begin a relationship with a teacher in the local primary school, Niamh Kirwan, an attractive, vivacious woman going through marital difficulties. After a social evening in the community centre, the pair find themselves alone and slightly inebriated. The inevitable happens when they inadvertently bump into one another:

But the jostle set free what each had been clamping down on for many months. They were no longer strong enough to deny the powerful urge; nor did they want to. He kissed her moist lips. His hands caressed and ran riot through her hair. The onrush of feeling almost engulfed him, but like someone startled out of sleep by a nightmare, he stopped, pushed her gently away and stepped backwards. (109)

Brian and Niamh are lonely, frustrated individuals with a need for human warmth and companionship. They feel a genuine attraction for one another and the fact that the passion is illicit only adds to their desire. It is interesting that the title of King's book is inspired by a line from Patrick Kavanagh's masterpiece, *The Great Hunger*: 'For the strangled impulse, there is no redemption.' Kavanagh knew all about loneliness, repression and yearning, even though he never took a vow of celibacy. The struggle of the priest with the urgings of the flesh is conveyed in a successful manner by King, as Brian succumbs over and over again to his desire:

Relief that came with absolution was short-lived when the storm clouds of guilt about the theft of another man's wife battered his soul. Disdainful voices from within accused him of violating what was more fundamental than any label moral theologians could put on his depraved conduct. He was sinking lower into the swamp-land of his own desire without regard for Niamh or her husband, whom he must have wedged apart; even pagan tribes in the jungles of Africa observed such basic laws of society. (115)
Tim Sheridan remarks to his younger colleague that the role of a priest has changed a lot... And then there is the accompanying guilt and the resolve to avoid occasions of sin. People close to Brian spot that all is not well with him, but he manages to hide what exactly is causing his disquiet. His final break with Niamh leads to heightened drinking and self-loathing. Fr Tim Sheridan remarks to his younger colleague that the role of a priest has changed a lot in that he is now meant to be warm and friendly with parishioners while at the same time keeping his distance from them. ‘In my time, they accepted that the priest kept apart.’ (137). When Brian’s friendship with a nun, Sr Margaret, begins to head in the same direction as his liaison with Niamh, she recognises that this will cause problems for them both and decides to erect barriers in order ensure that their relationship remains purely on the level of friendship. She becomes alarmed at the deterioration in his appearance, however, and learns from a bit of background research that he is developing a dependency on drink. On one occasion, she suggests to him that he might try a different way of breaking his drinking habit: ‘Or maybe absolving yourself. Do you think you can do that or will you keep reproaching yourself for the rest of your life?’ (156).

When reading through The Strangled Impulse, one gains some insight into the routine of priestly life. Towards the beginning of his time in Melrose, the following is the description of what the new curate’s life is like:

What worried Brian more than all that was his own lack of interest, as if his enthusiasm had drained away. Yet he limped along, said Mass, sat in the confessional of the empty church on a Saturday night, gave the school cleaners their cheques and notified the police when the alarm went off in Holy Trinity (the local school). (31)

Witnessing the harsh and unfair treatment meted out by Fr Brannigan to the nun, Sr Fidelis, who comes in to help him with the paperwork, makes Brian wonder what gives the parish priest the right to speak to people the way he does. When questioned about the episode by Brian, Fidelis remarks: ‘I don’t wish to be uncharitable, but that man doesn’t know when he is giving offence. What you saw just now was mild in comparison.’ (35) In a sense, his age makes Fr Brannigan a very different proposition to his curates. He is used to making decisions without consulting anyone, to laying down the law and to silencing anything that he perceives as opposition to his authority. The following evening, alone in the confessional after listening to an elderly parishioner, Brian reflects on what was the point in ‘continuing a system that compelled an old man to come out and confess what had been nothing more than a healthy impulse?’ (37) He thinks back to the early years of his ministry,
when young women agonized over the use of contraceptives and he, a twenty-five-year-old priest, ‘with set answers to every problem’ (37), had had no compunction about trotting out the party line contained in the Pope’s encyclical on birth control. His approach changed over the years and he became more compassionate in the advice he handed out to women who were encountering difficulties with the Church’s ban on artificial contraception. Fr Hegarty had no qualms on that score and openly revealed his curmudgeonly disdain for a social worker called Harding who, according to him, was advising women to leave their husbands and to go on the Pill. He designated her a ‘silly bitch’ with no dress sense (she wore dungarees that only served to emphasise her ‘fat arse’) and was merely ‘putting silly ideas into women’s heads’. (81)

At the end of King’s novel, Fr Brian reaches some kind of accommodation with his ministry. He gets to grips with his drinking, takes more exercise and contemplates whether or not to continue life as a priest. It is not an easy choice, as he knows only too well. But he is equally aware that he cannot turn his back on it easily: ‘Of this he was certain: the mysterious appeal that drew him to that sanctuary (the church) still called, except now he knew the price to pay if he continued to answer’. (184) I am sure that the vast majority of priests face this choice at some stage in their lives: to leave or to stay. To enjoy the companionship of a partner and family, or to continue ministering to people whose appreciation of your work might not always be apparent. In the last pages of the narrative, we witness an animated discussion between the parish priest and Fr Hegarty, over the advisability of buying a new machine that would help them regulate the movement of the Bingo balls, an exchange that causes a smile to form on Fr O’Neill’s lips as he realises that, for all its drawbacks, life as a priest is his destiny. The concluding lines bear this out: ‘Brian unzipped the black cover of his breviary, blessed himself and read the final prayer of the day.’ (186)

*The Strangled Impulse* was a brave undertaking. William King knew that his fellow-priests would feel that it was bad enough for the media to be piling opprobrium on priests at the time it was published, without one of their own adding fuel to the fire by writing a novel like this. But he consoled himself with a comment by Cardinal Suhard: ‘One of the priest’s first services to the world is to tell the truth.’ (188) Telling the truth sounds easier than it is and that is why *The Strangled Impulse* is an important document in assessing the evolving role of priesthood in an Ireland that was moving from blind devotion to Catholicism to a more secular society in which the role of the priest would be significantly different.