Alcoholism, Miscomprehension and Salvation: Edwin O'Connor's The Edge of Sadness

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Edwin O’Connor’s The Edge of Sadness

Éamon Maher

The Irish-American writer Edwin O’Connor (1918-1968) was a well-known figure during his rather short lifetime, but then fell into relative obscurity after his death. Writing in The Call on the 11th of March, 2011, Russ Olivo noted:

He never smoked or drank. No one can recall that he ever raised his voice in anger. And the khakis and loafers he was fond of wearing were as low-key as his personality. In many ways the Pulitzer Prize was a crown that never quite fit Edwin O’Connor, author of The Last Hurrah, and the city’s most famous Irish-American native son.¹

The Pulitzer Prize to which Olivo refers was awarded to O’Connor in 1962 for the novel on which we will concentrate our attention in this article, The Edge of Sadness (1961). The book is dedicated to Frank O’Malley, a charismatic English Professor who changed the course of O’Connor’s life when they met in the seminary-like University of Notre Dame in 1935. Like the novel’s main protagonist, Fr Hugh Kennedy, O’Malley was a chronic alcoholic, which at times caused a blurring of his usually sharp intellect and ultimately damaged his career. O’Malley’s passion for literature and his excellent lectures persuaded O’Connor to change his major from Journalism to English, which was crucial in his subsequent decision to become a creative writer.

When it was first published, The Edge of Sadness highlighted many of the problems besetting the Catholic Church on the eve of Vatican II. However, the issues dealt with such as the isolated and lonely lives of priests, the need for a rejuvenated and more democratic Church, increased lay participation in parish life, a revamping of liturgies, especially the Mass, all of which were highly relevant during the 1960s, probably did not have the same traction in later years and may explain why the novel lost some of its appeal. The reissuing of the title by Loyola Press in 2005 helped to reignite its popularity in more recent times. In his Introduction to the later edition, Ron Hansen assesses the relevance of O’Connor’s novel:

The greatness of The Edge of Sadness lies not in the insider’s view of ecclesiastical life, or in its portrayal of steely faith, bloody martyrdom, or the heroic struggle to seek out a seemingly ever-withdrawing God. Instead it lies in its evocation of the age-old maladies of selfishness, lethargy, indifference and bleakness of soul.²

What interests me particularly is O’Connor’s insightful portrayal of the lives of priests. He is particularly astute in capturing the pain
3. The references to the strong Irish community and certain other landmarks leave the reader in no doubt that the city depicted is Boston.

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and frustration of his main protagonist, Fr Hugh Kennedy, who, as a result of his problems with alcoholism, finds himself working in a disadvantaged inner-city parish, St Paul's, which appears to be in the throes of spiritual apathy: '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' (155-6). This description is very similar to how Bernanos' curé describes the ennui at the heart of his parish of Ambricourt in Diary of a Country Priest. Kennedy knows that his removal from the more prosperous parish of St Raymond's is the price he had to pay for his alcohol dependency. His Bishop probably believed that it was important for Kennedy to distance himself from the wealthy Carmody family, who were life-long friends of the parish priest and among the most prominent members at St Raymond's. Notwithstanding the successful treatment he undergoes for his problems with drink, Kennedy finds 'the fatal slow smog of the spirit' in St Paul's difficult to cope with. Fr Donowski, his curate, is well-meaning but naïve, and the two men have little in common outside of living in the same house and running a parish where practice is low and money hard to come by. The contrast between the life they lead and the glamorous one sometimes portrayed in the Hollywood movies that Kennedy had watched as a young boy could not be more stark. On one particularly dismal evening, he remarks: '[... ] I'm a stranger in this smallest and dreariest part of my parish where—all moving pictures to the contrary—I can assure you that the priest is not the legendary, revered figure, capable of healing with a glance' (157). As Kennedy describes it, the work of a priest tends to be a lot more mundane and less dramatic than what one encounters in the movies. Rather than bringing healing and effecting change in the lives of people embroiled in spiritual crisis, Kennedy's routine is one that revolves around saying Mass, praying, administering the sacraments and generally staying on top of parish finances. He often despairs at how in spite of his best efforts, the majority of those attending his Masses have very little comprehension of what he is trying to say in his sermons. On the faces of his congregation, he reads: 'Not interest or attention or boredom or discontent—just polite, neutral nothing' (30). Then again he realises that what really matters is not the reaction elicited by the sermon, but the Mass itself. Experience has taught him not to put too much store by eloquence:

I know priests who are counted immensely successful in the pulpit: vibrant, eloquent men who capture a throng with a word. I don't for a moment doubt they do good work, but at the same time I always wonder how deep down the word really goes, and if it goes down, does it stay awhile, or is it gone overnight, like some bubble
Priests have no real way of assessing what impact their explanations and guidance are having on the congregation.

This goes to the root of the problem. Priests have no real way of assessing what impact their explanations and guidance are having on the congregation in front of them. Most of the time they must just try their best and hope that the message gets through to at least a few people. Then there are those who find their own solutions to the dilemmas that cross their path. Charlie Carmody, the wealthy patriarch, is one such party. He attends Mass unexpectedly in St Paul’s one morning and invites Kennedy to his birthday party. The priest has little choice but to accept and finds it odd to be back among so many of his former friends and parishioners in St Raymond’s. Shortly after the party, old Charlie falls ill and asks for Hugh Kennedy to be sent to his room. Believing that 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. He then 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?’ (352) For some reason, Charlie got it into his head that Hugh’s late father may well have been the one person to have truly liked him. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Fr Hugh’s father actually held Charlie in utter contempt, as is summed up by his oft repeated description of the crooked businessman: ‘As fine a man as ever robbed the helpless’ (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). In other words, he lies, or to put it at its most benign, he embellishes the truth. His words seem to appease Charlie who, rather than ask his son, John, Hugh’s replacement in St Raymond’s, or Hugh himself, to hear his confession and administer the last rites, gets a Franciscan to perform these tasks. By the time Hugh enters his bedroom, Charlie is feeling reconciled with his fate: ‘So there it is, Father: the slate’s all wiped off. I told him (the Franciscan) all my sins: the whole lot. And he gave me Holy Communion. So now I’m ready, Father. I’m all set to go. Just the way I always wanted to. In the state of grace’ (489). He then makes a remarkable recovery and never again refers to his conversation with Hugh.4

Charlie Carmody is a wonderful depiction of a certain type of well-heeled Catholic who is able to twist his religious faith to suit his current state of mind and health. It is reasonable to assume that Hugh felt rather disappointed to be excluded from helping the elderly man in his hour of spiritual anguish. And yet experience should have taught the priest that those who are faced with death often react in an unexpected manner. The following anecdote related by Kennedy is revealing: ‘An old priest who was dying, one of the saintliest men I have ever known,
Those who know you most intimately are the ones most likely to hit the weak spot.

O'Connor demonstrates a great grasp of what constitutes the lived experience of the priest. When reflecting on his life, Hugh Kennedy make the following reflection: 'Because there is a sense in which a priest is dependent upon no one quite so much as another priest, for he has no wife, no child, and - in the ordinary meaning of the word - no home. His home is the rectory, his family, his fellow priests' (189). Hence, he begins to look on his confrère Donowski in a different light. He sees how he is totally lacking in pride and how he accepts his intellectual limitations: 'I think he may be the only man I know who can do so
Frank Regan lives in Southwest England.


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 candour of committed friends. 5

All of which will hopefully inspire readers of Spirituality to acquire a copy of this novel and to savour the sensitivity it displays towards the role of the priest in pointing others to God, even when they themselves are temporarily deprived of religious comfort and have to await its slow and painful reappearance.

(Continued from page 383)

He spoke to his friends and he spoke to his students. The response was generous and from humble beginnings he launched the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul. The primary mission is accompaniment in friendship through a regular visit or a warm welcome to the centres opened for the purpose of attending to the needs of the poor.

To enter into the experience of prayer guided by the fifteen short chapters of this book is to enter the world and the heart of a layman who was indeed an apostle of a church for the life of the world. Ozanam was a son of the Church and son of a society in political and social turmoil, a turmoil which impinged negatively on the lives of the poor. Frederic plunged himself into the mass of those who suffered and there he was salt of the earth, light for the world, mustard seed and leaven in the mass.

This little book will be of great help to those Christians searching for a lay guide to the life and mission of the Church in our post-christian world.

— Frank Regan