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Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Rebel Priests, Prophetic Voices

The Example of Jean Sulivan (1913-1980)

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.

1. Eamon Maher is one of the leading commentators on Jean Sulivan and has published several articles and a monograph, Jean Sulivan (1913-1980): La Marginalité dans la vie et l'oeuvre, on his work.

2. Petite littérature individuelle (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 142. All translations from Sulivan's texts will be mine, unless stated otherwise.


While nowhere nearly as well-known as his predecessors François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, Jean Sulivan, whose real name was Joseph Lemarchand, is a writer whose extensive oeuvre (comprising ten novels, two short story collections, several book-length essays and an important spiritual journal, Morning Light, the vast majority of which carry the imprint of the prestigious Galliamard publishing house) deserves far more recognition than it has received to date. Sulivan is shamefully neglected in his native France and hence, quite logically, even fewer outside of the Hexagon have had a chance to come in contact with his prophetic voice.

One of the reasons for his neglect might well be the difficulty of categorisation. When he began publishing novels in 1958 (at which point he was 45 years of age), the Catholic Novel was no longer a powerful force in France. Bernanos had died in 1948 and at around the same time Mauriac moved away from the novel form to concentrate on journalism. Sulivan knew that in the wake of World War II it was necessary to produce a form of writing capable of reflecting a much-changed spiritual landscape. He outlined his reasons for adopting a new approach in Petite littérature individuelle:

But whether it is that genius cannot be imitated, because former cultural and religious signs have become outdated, they can only communicate with a public living in the past. Spiritual heirs are either out of touch or else forced to renew themselves and follow a new direction, or else indeed return to silence.2

Clearly, Sulivan saw himself as someone who would be an initiator in terms of how he would convey the mystical in literature. Ordained a diocesan priest in 1938, he worked as a teacher in the Catholic lycée in Rennes for a number of years, during which time he was also responsible for setting up a very successful cinéclub, cultural centre and local newspaper. Nicknamed le curé rouge (the red priest) in the seminary for his radical views, Sulivan was never going to be an apologist for the Catholic Church, which he believed to be too taken up with pomp and ceremony, to the detriment of conveying the true message of the gospel. He outlined his hopes for the future in Morning Light:

I see the Church detaching its members from structures of profit, conventional security, and mythologies of happiness in order to make them spiritual nomads, capable of commitment without illusion, always ready to absent themselves in order to go somewhere else, straining for the impossible and necessary.3
Views like this were unlikely to win him favour among the hierarchy of the time (Morning Light was first published in 1976), but this was of little concern to Sullivan, who saw his writing as being in some way a continuation of the Gospel with all its calls for rebirth and displacement. He was distrustful of both literary and ecclesiastical establishments, as he believed that they had the effect of muzzling writers by ensuring they didn’t drift from the party line. Sullivan’s great hero was Jesus Christ, a man who contrived to be at variance with the ruling order of his time and who paid the ultimate price for his independence. His concern with the ostracized and neglected members of society also led Sullivan to see in the experience of these people the raw material for his art. He wrote, once more in Morning Light:

Jesus is on the side of the marginalized, the immigrants, the victims of prejudice, no doubt about it. But his attitude is far from that of democratic good will; he’s no bleeding heart. Can you see him, for example, like our shrewd modern bishops, trying to use democracy to impose Christian laws regarding divorce and abortion on non-Christians? As if Christian morality doesn’t have to come to birth freely in each individual conscience! 4

It is uncanny how relevant these sentiments are in the context of the third millennium. In Sullivan’s opinion, the Catholic Church should not impose its views on those of a non-Christian background. Indeed, he would have gone so far as to say that laying down the law with regard to complex issues like sexual and moral behaviour should not be a major preoccupation of the Church. Rather, it would be truer to the wishes of its founder were it to demonstrate love and compassion for those in pain, for the victims of crime and exploitation, for people with emotional and psychological scars, for all who are ignored by governments and societies because of severe poverty or addiction to drugs and alcohol. It was to such people that Jesus addressed himself and Sullivan does likewise in his novels, as we shall now see.

Published in 1964, The Sea Remains, Sullivan’s third novel, won the prestigious Grand Prix Catholique de Littérature. It tells the story of a retired Spanish cardinal who discovers in ‘the confined atmosphere of this house-to-die-in’ 5 overlooking the sea that his career has been a betrayal of his original vocation, which was to serve the poor. Having been caught up in the political machinations that are essential to those who strive for promotion within the Catholic Church, Ramon Rimaz is shocked at the degree to which his soul had become inured to the suffering of the very people whom he was called to serve.

Prior to his enforced retirement, the cardinal was going through photo albums which depicted his rise within the ranks of the Church. There
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were pictures of him with various dignitaries, dressed in his fine robes, wearing a look of authority and self-satisfaction. Suddenly the harsh realisation comes to him: 'You were lying, Ramon, you were lying and didn't know it' (18). His reawakening has begun and it will culminate in his taking a drastic course of action that will have serious repercussions for him and for his standing within the Church.

At the heart of The Sea Remains is the inner conversion of Cardinal Ramon Rimaz, who decides to end his life in what he considers an authentic fashion. He meets Minka on the beach one day and she tells him about her friend and political activist Monolo Vargas, who is incarcerated in the nearby prison. Minka has endured imprisonment and torture in her own life and, in spite of the danger to her own safety, she stays in Noria in order to be near to Monolo, who told her on one occasion: 'You can't give all your attention to being happy' (91). These words stayed with the Minka and she radiated the type of calm reassurance that impacted on the cardinal after he spoke to her. When Ramon suggests to the governor of the prison that he visit the inmates every now and again, the proposal is enthusiastically accepted. This changes when, during one of his visits, Ramon exchanges clothes with Monolo who manages to leave the prison undetected. The cardinal suddenly becomes the enemy of the people with whom he had always curried favour during his clerical career and the reader is given to understand that his fate is to end his days in jail. This strange gesture is not explained, but there are hints throughout the novel that Ramon Rimaz is starting to question his role within the Church. Ensconced in his episcopal palace, it had been easy to justify his neglect of the poor and the marginalised: 'Temptation had ceased when he had come into power, when his heart had been changed to stone. Petrification—it was the one temptation he hadn't thought of, which no one ever seemed to have thought of.' (81) It was this 'petrification' that caused him to carry out his duties without a thought for the consequences of his decisions on others, or for the negative example he might be giving to sincere Catholics anxious to lead good Christian lives. It had caused him to wear a mask and to carry on as if his quest for power was a worthwhile way of serving God. The realisation that he had not so much been interested in being a force for good as is his own advancement reveals how far removed his attitude was from that of Christ:

Power and all the prestige that accompanied it—Jesus had crucified them. How could those who had governed in his name have been able to act as princes, to cover themselves with all the emblems of glory that had been flouted once and for all, that had become the privilege of the world? (110)
Such self-knowledge is not given to many. In the case of Ramon Rimaz, it encourages him to take up the Cross in a real, and not a symbolic, manner. He deliberately chooses a course of action that allows him to identify with the oppressed and the marginalised, a group with which he wishes once more to identify. These were the people with whom Christ surrounded himself and he, too, alienated the civil and religious authorities by his actions and was thus condemned to death. It is difficult to spend all one’s adult life talking about eternal life, transforming bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, advising people how they should behave in accordance to the rules of the Church, without succumbing to the trappings of power. The Spanish cardinal is shocked to think of how he substituted worldly success for spiritual fervour: ‘Unbelievable. Everything happened outside me, I was on exhibit.’ (8)

One wonders to what extent the jury that awarded Sulivan the Grand Prix Catholique understood the true message of The Sea Remains. Because it is a novel that shines a light into some of the murkier sides of clerical life and that challenges a number of practices within the Catholic Church. Sulivan was initially reluctant to accept the Prize, concerned at how such an acknowledgement by the Catholic Establishment might hamper his desire to explore themes and characters that would not necessarily find favour with the hierarchy or with his fellow priests and lay Catholics. In the end, his friend Daniel-Rops, who had done much to ensure Sulivan’s novel was successful, prevailed on him to accept, emphasising the pleasure it would give his mother. Indeed, Sulivan already knew how dubious his mother was about his writing. A woman of simple faith and with little or no education, she had often wondered how there was no mention of her son’s writings in the Catholic press. The reassurance of seeing his photograph in La Croix receiving the award was what finally made up Sulivan’s mind. He would subsequently bitterly regret the decision, feeling that this consecration by the Catholic reading public placed him in a category that did not suit his artistic bent. A few years later, he wrote of his embarrassment on the night of the awards’ ceremony in his memoir Anticipate Every Goodbye:

You’re nothing but an impostor! You describe a cardinal who turns his back on his exalted position within the Church to follow a more humble path. […] And you, the writer who brought this cardinal to life, you dare to show yourself thus in public, to lap up all this praise.6

Sulivan seems to infer that his preoccupation with literary glory blinded him and others to the true message of the novel, which is really about shedding the superficial external persona in order to rediscover the

path that leads to spiritual fulfilment. It is significant that after *The Sea Remains*, Sulivan deliberately moved away from a form of literature that was concerned primarily with sales and favourable criticism. His style became jerky and one has difficulty differentiating between the narrator, the author and the characters. Often, as is the case with his next novel, *Eternity, My Beloved* (1966), the characters are based on people whom Sulivan knew in real life and who are barely fictionalised. *Eternity, My Beloved* introduces us to Jerome Strozzi, to whom Sulivan was introduced by a former prostitute, Elizabeth, who spoke constantly about this renegade priest: ‘To hear her talk, he (Strozzi) was the alpha and the omega, the key and the source.’ Strozzi is based on a real-life figure, Auguste Rossi, who came to Paris during the German Occupation and worked in Pigalle until his death some years later. He featured also in Gilbert Cesbron’s classic novel on the Worker Priests, *Les Saints vont en enfer*, under the sobriquet ‘le père Pigalle.’ The prostitutes of this notorious Parisian red light district became Strozzi’s special flock and their affection for him incited doubts about his peculiar ministry among the superiors of his religious order and other traditional Catholics who complained how he was a source of scandal to the Church. When he was young, Strozzi’s mother had warned him specifically not to wander out on the streets which she said were full of *cocottes* (ladies of the night). Reflecting on this in the final years of his life, Strozzi reckons that it was as well his mother died when he was eight years old. ‘She would have suffered too much seeing his career interrupted and becoming…’ (4) The ellipses are deliberate here and they serve to underline how difficult it is for outsiders to comprehend the exact nature of Strozzi’s ministry. The fact that he is regularly seen consorting with ‘fallen’ women, that they regularly embrace him or sit on his knee, that he refuses to judge or to give any thought to what others think of his behaviour, mark Strozzi out as a very different kind of priest. Sulivan is clearly impressed by the singular witness Strozzi supplies, and admits: ‘He lives what I just talk about’ (97). The writer’s mission is to record the way in which Strozzi’s presence in Pigalle has a positive impact on the women who earn their living there. On one occasion Strozzi admits to the narrator (a thinly disguised version of Sulivan) that prayer became natural to him when he returned to Paris. The testimonies of women like Elizabeth and Pâquerette show how he restores their faith in men and, by extension, in the Church of which he is the only daily representative in their lives. Pâquerette says that he was, ‘The first man who had ever looked on her as a human being […] Everything probably starts from this point: self-respect becomes possible again.’ (31) Elizabeth goes even farther:

It’s as if he were making love to you without his realizing it – and without your realizing it either. But it lasts. You feel like forgiving
everyone that ever hurt you. You'd like to pour out on others the love that he has given you (61).

In many respects, Strozzi is a living incarnation of the Gospel message of unconditional love. Thankfully he is allowed continue to minister in Pigalle, in spite of being summoned to appear before the cardinal to answer complaints that have come in about his irregular lifestyle. In the end, the cardinal allows him to carry on, sensing that he is inspired by a genuine commitment to the women he has befriended in Pigalle. Nevertheless, he is somewhat bemused by his encounter with such an original priest: ‘Who is this Strozzi? A saint, an eccentric, a poor wretch who needs the scum of society to help him breathe easily, a prophet?’ (78) Sulivan harbours no such doubts:

Frankly, that's the kind I like. The ones who have no family or folklore. All human hope is snatched from them, tossed into the unknown, the solitude grafted into their hearts is so profound that their only escape is flight—or an immense love. They can never be pillars of society—honest, dull, sterile bureaucrats, choked, in spite of their generosity, by the iron collar of prudence. They have such a loneliness in their hearts that they go about like beggars, looking all over the world for father, mother, brothers sisters. They finally become rebels and, naturally enough, are persecuted. (4-5)

These lines provide an excellent summary of Jean Sulivan's ideal priest, a man who is not afraid of uprooting himself, of putting himself at the service of others, especially the poor and the wounded. Clearly, this prototype will only suit a very small number, and Sulivan himself acknowledges that he could never do what Strozzi does. Nevertheless, by capturing in writing the prophetic nature of this witness to the gospel values, Sulivan calls on other Catholics to question their comfortable lives and to ask themselves if this is what Jesus would have wanted. In Ramon Rimaz and Strozzi, Sulivan presents two very different priests who ultimately benefit from a moment of interior illumination that allows them to choose a path that will bring pain and suffering, but also an unbelievable joy that comes from putting others ahead of themselves. We would do well to heed the message contained in Strozzi's prophetic example:

Once more it seemed obvious to me that it was not to Pigalle that Jerome Strozzi had most to say. It was, rather, to the smooth world of sensible, decent people, of respectable families, to the entrepreneurs of salvation, to those who traded in souls, to all those who prefer money, order and comfort to love. (143)

Sulivan's rebel priests make people feel uncomfortable because they force us all to re-examine our lives and to see how far removed they are from the selfless giving of ourselves to others that is called for in the Gospels. Every now and again, we need such prophetic witnesses to shake us out of our complacency.