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Eamon Maher

TU Dublin - Tallaght Campus, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Jean Sullivan: Prophetic Voice with an important message for the Irish Church

Eamon Maher

The French priest writer Jean Sullivan (1913-1980), whose real name was Joseph Lemarchand, was born in the small village of Montauban-de-Bretagne. He lost his father in the trenches of the Great War, an event that led to the remarriage of his mother out of financial necessity and which came as a serious blow to her young son. He could never fully accept the presence of his step-father in the house even though he knew his mother had had no option other than to remarry if she wanted to hold on to the small farm she rented from a local doctor. Influenced by the simple piety of his mother, Sullivan entered the junior seminary at a young age and was ordained priest in 1938. He described his period in the seminary as a 'purgatory', a place where all concessions to individuality had to be sacrificed to the collective will. In his memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, he described how a young peasant like himself could quite easily have lost the run of himself after ordination: 'People told us too often in the seminary that we were the elect, the privileged, that we had a vocation to become saints. It was true.'¹ The natural deference towards clergy in rural Brittany at this time ensured that there was little or no challenge to the authority of priests, who were placed on a pedestal in a way that is very similar to the situation that prevailed in Ireland up until the last few decades.

After ordination, Sullivan worked as a teacher in Rennes for a number of years and became involved in several local cultural initiatives there. He published his first essay, *Provocation ou la faiblesse de Dieu*, dedicated to Franco-American writer Julien Green, in 1958, and between that and his death 22 years later, he

1 Jean Sullivan, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*. Translated by Eamon Maher (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2000), p.56. This award-winning memoir is a beautiful account of the writer's youth growing up in Brittany, his close relationship with his devout mother, his training in the seminary and the life he led as a priest. Subsequent in-text citations will be designated by *AEG*, followed by the page number.

Eamon Maher is Director of the National Centre of Franco-Irish Studies, TUD – Tallaght Campus, Dublin 24 FKT9.

published 10 novels, 2 short story collections, a spiritual journal, *Matinales (Morning Light)*, and the aforementioned memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye (Devance tout adieu)*. He was also commissioning editor of a highly regarded series, *Connivence*, with Desclée de Brouwer. He won a number of literary awards and, like his contemporary Camus, was part of the prestigious Gallimard publishing house's stable of writers.

Sullivan was fortunate to have had a superior, Cardinal Roques, who early in his ministry released him from pastoral duties to enable him to concentrate exclusively on his writing. This was a daring decision, because Sullivan's books contain stinging criticisms of things like authoritarianism, groupthink and the abuse of power within the Catholic Church. In addition, among his fictional characters can be found several rebel priests (many based on people he knew in real life), who end up ministering to prostitutes, tramps, drug addicts, and other misfits of society. In Sullivan's estimation, these people often know the true message of Christianity a lot more intimately than those living comfortable lives at the centre – and he would have included most of the clerical caste in that latter category.

At times, his characters choose marginality as distinct from having it imposed on them, because they see it as a more effective way of living out the Gospel message than remaining tied to the institutional Church, which he perceived as being in terminal decline. At several points during his literary career – and remember that he was a functioning priest throughout the 1960s and 70s when he was publishing his provocative and challenging books – Sullivan called for a different type of Church, one modelled more closely on what its founder had in mind. The following lines are taken from *Morning Light*:

Faith makes us see everything differently. When the Church's prestige diminishes, when freedom shatters various forms of hypocrisy, when priests who for centuries have been under pressures that forced a large number to choose between a dishonest vocation and social disgrace are able to make their own decisions a little more freely, when churches begin to recognize that they can no longer use their political weight to influence moral decisions, there are clear signs of a Christian renaissance which, obviously, has nothing to do with social structures. Where did we get the idea that faith existed in order to prop up the social order of this world?²

2 Jean Sullivan, *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sullivan*. Translated by Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 149. All subsequent in-text citations will use the abbreviation *M*, followed by the page number.

This is hard-hitting stuff, even though clearly written by someone with a genuine attachment to the Catholic Church. Published in 1976, at a time when the initial enthusiasm generated by Vatican II was already beginning to fade in parishes throughout France, where a reduced number of priests were struggling to regain the ground lost to a tide of secularisation and spiritual indifference – much the same scenario as Irish priests are faced with currently – there is a clear sense that Sullivan is reflecting the reality on the ground. Bernanos had written about the dechristianization of France as early as the 1930s in his classic *Diary of a Country Priest*, which showed the extent to which spiritual apathy had taken hold on French society. By the end of World War II, Marxism was beginning to replace the role previously played by religion, particularly among the working classes. Sullivan was recommending a root and branch change that would move away from a structured, hierarchical Church, from an organisation taken up with political and social ambition, to one concerned primarily with the breath of the Gospel, with all its calls for uprooting and rebirth. But, as is often the case, many within the Church organisation, and particularly those at the top, were not ready for such radical change and Sullivan, while always remaining a priest, albeit a marginal one, came to be seen as a type of oddity, a man whose artistic notions blinded him to the day-to-day exigencies of running a global organisation.

Taking a few of Sullivan's works, this paper will show how his literary enterprise was his attempt to live out his Christian faith in a different way. Sullivan's mantra of '*en marge pour être au coeur*' ('on the margins to be at the heart of things') sums up his life and that of several of his characters. His prophetic voice led to alienation from the clerical circle and there were times when he had great difficulties reconciling his literary vocation with his priesthood. A few months before his unfortunate death, a couple of days after being involved in a hit and run accident as he was emerging from one of his daily walks in the Bois de Boulogne, Sullivan recorded a revealing interview with Alain Saury in which he explained what prompted him to become a writer. Initially, he admitted, he was attracted by the writers of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, people like Claudel, Martin du Gard and Bernanos. He wanted primarily to write beautiful things ('faire beau', as he put it), but slowly something else took hold of him and he found himself writing in a different, more disjointed way. Plots and characterisation seemed to concern him less than allowing the words speak in a more intimate way to his readers. He said to Saury:

Writing is a physical thing, a body, a living presence which is expressed in a breath, a rhythm. People who read with their eyes think that I am only writing about myself. They are completely incapable of understanding my literary objective. Those who like my writing read me with their lips, with their breath. They 'speak' me spontaneously, like one says a poem.³

The emphasis placed on language as breath, body and rhythm is significant here and reverts once more to the original oral traditions out of which the Gospels emerged. In order to enter into communion with Sullivan's message (if he actually has one to impart), his words should be read aloud, like one reads a poem, as this engenders a spontaneous connivance between author and reader, which is at the core of Sullivan's art. In another interview he gave, this time with Marie-Thérèse Maltèse on the 24 September, 1978, as part of *Le Jour du Seigneur* programme on TF1, Sullivan declared that literature was 'menteuse', or deceitful, a quality that nevertheless did not prevent his work from reaching a certain number of readers who heard their own voice in his words: 'And this is why I think that by the means of a human language, the Word of the Gospel can be expressed, even though no one can ever say when this will happen'.⁴

We will set about examining how this melding of human language and the Divine Word acts out in two of Sullivan's best known works, *Mais il y a la Mer* (*The Sea Remains*) and *Car je t'aime, ô éternité* (*Eternity, my Beloved*). Both novels have clerical figures as their main characters, a retired Spanish cardinal in *The Sea Remains* and a priest who ends up ministering to the prostitutes in Pigalle, in *Eternity, My Beloved*. What is significant about both portrayals is the manner in which adopting a rebellious or marginal stance in relation to institutional religion opens up the path towards a more fulfilling and authentic spiritual life for the priests.

Take the example of Ramon Rimaz, a man who rises to the position of Cardinal and then, in his retirement villa beside the sea, starts to put his achievements in perspective and sees, to his horror, that he has been living a lie. Going through old photographs and articles that his housekeeper stored carefully away, Ramon looks with fresh eyes on the ostentatious vestments he wore at

3 Text of the Saury interview was reproduced in *Rencontres avec Jean Sullivan 2* (Paris: Association des Amis de Jean Sullivan, 1985), p.13. My translation. This is the French version: 'L'écriture, c'est un corps, c'est une présence vivante qui se dit dans un souffle, dans un rythme. Les gens qui lisent avec les yeux croient que j'écris de moi, ils sont complètement étrangers à ce que je fais. Ceux qui aiment ce que je fais me lisent avec les lèvres, avec le souffle, ils me parlent spontanément, comme on lit un poème.'

4 "La Parole Inachevée", *Rencontres avec Jean Sullivan 3*, Septembre 1987, pp.11-20, p.19. My translation. Here is the French: 'Et c'est ainsi que je pense qu'à travers une parole humaine, la parole évangélique peut se dire, mais on ne sait pas quand.'

official ceremonies, the impenetrable look he assumed at various functions, the complimentary newspaper accounts of his elevation to the status of Cardinal, and sees that his career within the Church has been a betrayal of the Gospel message of love and humility. He remarks to himself: 'How we love to use up in spectacle, in celebrations, in one day, the secret that should lift up an entire life!' Sickened by such stark revelations of his vanity, he turns abruptly to his housekeeper and orders her to burn all these signs of what to him now is nothing more than a life devoted to self-aggrandisement. The narrator, who is at times indistinguishable from Sullivan, interjects in the narrative to address his character directly:

Shout, Ramon, cry out! I tried to imagine him, rising to his full height, swollen with anger, suppressing the words: that Christianity was at the service of no state, of no country, but was first of all at the service of liberty and the salvation of the living.⁵

A conversion has started, one that will lead to the Cardinal rediscovering his original vocation and to his subsequent alienation of both the secular and Church authorities whose favour he had curried throughout his career. As with any epiphany, it is not just one trigger, but a series of revelations and chance occurrences that open the cardinal's eyes and show him the path that he must follow. Even before his retirement, he had begun to realise that time was running out for him to rediscover the deeper meaning of the Gospel, which overturns the natural order of things by calling on its followers to leave behind material possessions and family, to sacrifice all for the common good, to love others unconditionally. Ramon sees clearly that he had not done that in the course of his life as a priest, bishop and cardinal: "I was asleep and I didn't know it", he murmurs to himself (*RS*, 40). But the reawakening is not far away. He meets a young boy near the sea and speaks to him. The boy's father, Monolo, is in the local prison and his lover Minka, from Yugoslavia, has resolved to stay in the area until she can find a way to have him released. Rimaz sees in this scenario a way of atoning for his past failings. He starts visiting the prison dressed in all the finery that befits a Prince of the Church and addresses the inmates on a number of occasions, much to the delight of the Governor. Then one day, he exchanges clothes with Monolo, who escapes in the Cardinal's car. In colluding in this way with an

5 Jean Sullivan, *The Sea Remains*. Translated by Robert A. Donahue and Joseph Cunneen (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 31. All subsequent in-text references with abbreviation *RS*, followed by the page number.

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anarchist, Ramon knows that he will incur the wrath of his former friends and colleagues who are incapable of understanding what they perceive to be a treacherous act. Even the narrator is at a loss to know why someone in Ramon's position would do something like this:

When had he made the unbelievable decision? Because it is not enough to want to help. A movement of the soul accomplishes nothing if events don't cooperate with it, like an animal who must go down on his knees for you to mount him. (RS, 97)

In the sermons he gave in the little church of Noria on the Sundays of Advent, Ramon had begun to explore the contradictions he now perceived within institutional religion. To a rather bemused congregation of families who depended on fishing for their livelihood and who really had not the capacity to follow the complex rhetoric of a man trying to put his life in order, Ramon shared some of his deepest thoughts:

But little by little, he said, he had come to think that the social power of the Church could be the cause of its spiritual weakness, just as mass membership could go hand in hand with profound alienation. The Church itself ought to be poor and humble, without waiting to be crucified. People were able to be poor and humble for themselves, and rich and proud for the Church. (RS, 100)

These are the words of someone who had seen that the crux of the problem besetting the Church lay in its desire to retain its power at all costs, even to the point of abandoning the poor and the weak, the two groups that Christ had favoured above all others. No one is quite sure what will become of the cardinal at the end of the novel. Some say that he has been sent to a monastery to reflect on his actions and others that he has been consigned to spend the rest of his days in jail. When asked why her uncle did what he did, Merché responds: "I believe – for no reason. He was beyond all explanations. Someone needed him. He went there naively." (RS, 117) This is as good an analysis as any. After all, the recesses of the human mind are impossible to decipher and what motivates people to act in a certain manner can never be understood fully.

It is interesting that a novel which has so many overt criticisms of the Church should have received the Grand Prix Catholique de littérature for Sullivan in 1964. This proves first of all, I suppose, that it contains definite literary merit. Sullivan was conscious that the award would gain him more readers and establish him as a

writer. However, he was also uncomfortable that the public would now regard him as a 'Catholic' writer, a member of the literary and clerical establishment, which was something that he wanted to avoid at all costs. In his memoir, he reproached himself for accepting the prize:

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. (*AEG*, 87)

I feel Sullivan was far too self-critical in this instance. However, it is significant that after the success of *The Sea Remains*, he made a conscious effort to abandon his original desire to 'prettify' in order to find a language capable of conveying the transformation that takes hold of his characters, who tend to be more radically, and obviously, marginal. Strozzi, the hero of Sullivan's next novel, *Eternity, My Beloved* (1966), is based on a real-life figure who was referred to in Gilbert Cesbron's famous novel, *Les saints vont en enfer* (1952), as le 'Père Pigalle'. During his career as a priest, Strozzi had done a stint as superior in a seminary and, in spite of a tendency towards rebelliousness, there was little to suggest he would end up in his sixties tendering to the ladies of the night in Paris. Originally, Sullivan had intended writing his novel about Elizabeth, a former prostitute, but little by little he found himself being drawn to the strange priest of whom she spoke constantly:

Strozzi stole my novel from me. To be honest, he's paying me back a hundredfold since he's giving me his very soul. What's good about the soul is that, without splitting it up, you can give it away to a crowd and still possess it. But Strozzi doesn't like to use the word soul any more.⁶

From the very first page, therefore, Sullivan admits the fascination that Strozzi exerts over him. He is an unconventional priest, one whose Christian example causes hardened prostitutes to look on religion in a different light. He does not admonish them for selling their bodies for money, remarking that there are worse types of prostitution than the kind that they engage in. Nor does he seek to convert them to the ways of the Church, believing them to be superior in many ways to the so-called model Christians who spend their time backbiting and trying to impress others with their piety.

6 Jean Sullivan, *Eternity, My Beloved*. Translated by Sr. Ellen Riordan (St. Paul, MN: River Boat Books, 1998), p.1. All subsequent references will be designated by *EMB*.

For Strozzi, the community spirit he finds in Pigalle is energising. He remarks to Sullivan that 'prayer only became natural to him, a true link of friendship, the day he became part of his neighbourhood in Paris.' (*EMB*, 15) His 'flock' equally are transformed by his presence among them. For Pâquerette, 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.' (*EMB*, 31) Elizabeth goes even further: 'To hear Elizabeth tell it, he was the beginning of it all, the reason and the key, the alpha and the omega.' (*EMB*, 39) That women with such a negative experience of religion and human relationships should respond to Strozzi in this positive way illustrates the impact Sullivan has on their lives. But of course not everyone is happy with his conduct. His brother priests and naysayers among the laity bring his unusual behaviour to the attention of the authorities. He is interviewed about his work by a cardinal who is slightly bemused by this elderly man with the bright eyes:

Who is this Strozzi? A saint, an eccentric, a poor wretch who needs the scum of society to help him breathe easily, a prophet? "If I had a whole crowd like him – but what can I do with just one?" (*EMB*, 78)

In the end, the cardinal sends him to the provincial of his order who removes all financial support, but allows him to continue in his ministry – Strozzi could not have wished for more. Sullivan admits his fascination for a brother priest who places others ahead of himself, who is not afraid of being pilloried by so-called respectable Catholics and who simply goes about providing Christian witness among a group of wounded and marginalized women. Sullivan remarks: 'I thought I was the only one who interpreted the Gospel in that way. But he lives what I just talk about.' (*EMB*, 97) Very few people would be capable of uprooting themselves like Strozzi does to be unconditionally available to others. Sullivan's own role was perhaps to write about people like Strozzi, to point out the joy that comes from loving those whom others disdain, from giving himself completely without any thought of a return.

Clearly, there is so much more that could be said about Jean Sullivan's prophetic witness. He declines to offer any simple solutions where none exists. He invites his readers to embark on a journey whose destination is unknown and which is full of danger and uncertainty. He makes it clear that when we think we have found the answers that give meaning to our lives, it is time to start afresh, to seek out new challenges. Because the quest never ends, the goal is always in the distance, urging us forward, showing

us that it is through searching and in choosing the marginal path that we will come to know something of the mystery of life. I'll conclude with one last quote from *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. (M, 158)

This dream is far from a reality in the Irish Church of today, which appears to be more intent on trying to resurrect a once powerful edifice that has had its day, on proclaiming moral certitudes where none exists, on ostracising and silencing its priests who refuse to follow the party line, on making pronouncements rather than engaging with what's left of the faithful on what sort of a future we can build together. 'Straining for the impossible and necessary' is so much more in tune with the Gospel theme of rebirth than maintaining the status quo. I am with Sullivan on this.

Prayer of comfort. For me, one of the most beautiful verses in the Bible comes from Psalm 23: 'In grassy meadows he lets me lie, by tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit'. When I repeat it like a mantra, I am suddenly transported to another time and place. I am invited to rest a while among the meadows and streams in the company of the Good Shepherd, who is my everything. If I sense the finger pointing at me again, then I pause, smile and return to my mantra.

- GAVIN THOMAS MURPHY, *Bursting out in Praise* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.16.