

The Transparency of Grace: Bernanos and the Priesthood

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I must withdraw so that God can touch the people whom chance places on my way, people that he loves. My presence is as indiscrete as if I were to be discovered between two lovers or between two friends.

Simone Weil¹

The Catholic faith of Georges Bernanos was simple if not uncritical. He claimed to be thoroughly of the Church yet he was dissatisfied with many aspects of its temporal existence. He sometimes rejected classification as a Catholic writer, regarding himself as a writer who was also Catholic. His books were not designed for a restricted audience, but were a kind of wayside preaching of the mysterious way of providence, and the dangers to humanity when God was written out of the story of its life.

His works were not designed to promote the self-protective certainties of contemporary bourgeois Catholicism. His clerical heroes, in particular, were all John the Baptist figures, raised up in the rural desert to uncover the superficialities of a compromised urban clerical Catholicism: *la confiture de Saint Sulpice*, as he allegedly referred to it. A truly Catholic existence lived under the unrelenting sun of divine grace was a demanding profession. Bernanos' religion was for heroes and saints. Their heroism was their commitment to truth, their fidelity to the gospel in the smallest and most ordinary things of life, and their unstinting, sacrificial, gift of themselves in the self-abandonment of love for God and those whom he had made. Bernanos' Church was the communion of saints, a place of exchange where ashes become fire and deserts bloom.

Georges Bernanos did not subscribe to an easy pattern of Catholic belonging. As Malcolm Scott has pointed out, it is significant that his clerical heroes derive their identity as strongly spiritual characters from their popular origins rather than through any association with the institutional Church.² His piety had its roots in his childhood memories of the Artois of so many of his novels, and could be characterised as strongly derived from the history and traditions of France. His was a traditional, ethnic, unacademic if not untheological faith, which eschewed

the subtleties and sophistication of the schools. The Curé of Ambricourt, the simple and agonised hero of Bernanos' masterpiece, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, is intelligent and had distinguished himself in his seminary studies, but his intellectual achievements are not the source of his wisdom. Similarly, the abbé Donnissan, the saint of Lumbres, in *Sous le soleil de Satan*, is gifted with a wisdom 'que la Sorbonne ne sait pas.' He knows exactly what man is: 'a big child full of vices and boredom'.³ It is the cross of Bernanos' priest heroes not to be satisfied with the superficial or the banal.

Bernanos makes no apology for his exploration of the spiritual dimension of human existence. A true picture of the human condition renders it necessary, because men and women are damaged by the wound of original sin which in turn affects their relation to each other and draws them into the disorder of particular sin. The truly human creature, transformed by grace into the image of God in Christ, experiences liberation through fidelity in poverty of spirit and self-giving sacrifice. It is then that the supernatural punctures and penetrates the fragile fortification of fantasy with which wounded humanity attempts to protect itself. Part of this process is fulfilled through the unself-regarding contemplation of the self as it really is. Bernanos decries the narcissistic fascination with self-image and the glamour of evil which is so characteristic of the arrested state of adolescence which, he claims, afflicts most human beings. Their attempts at singular wrong doing are less spectacular than pathetic in his view. In his novels he ruthlessly discloses that the vain attempts at singularity in evil made by the anti-heroes and heroines are no more than hollow attempts to escape from the relentless and unimaginative cycle of evil which typifies the banality of human existence. It is only when a simple, chosen soul, who belongs to two worlds, who incarnates sacramentally the promise of grace and the struggle of response and fidelity to that gift appears that the shimmering breach is made in the mirror of despair.

Bernanos was conscious from an early age of a vocation. In 1919, he regarded his profession as a writer as being imposed on him rather than directly chosen.⁴ Later still, in 1945, he was to describe his literary vocation as representing another aspect of the priestly vocation. He explained that

if God demands a particular kind of witness from us, it is necessary to be attentive to that call and to work hard at it. It is also necessary to suffer much, to doubt oneself without ceasing, in times of success and in times of failure. Because, seen like this, the profession of writer is not a profession, but an adventure, above all a spiritual adventure. But every spiritual adventure is a Calvary'.⁵

In *Journal d'un curé de campagne* published in 1936, the two vocations of writer and priest come together. The journal form of the book, with its occasional unfinished sentences, abruptly terminated paragraphs and undeveloped themes, gives it an immediacy which conveys a sense of the young priest's deepening of his vocation, despite its disappointments and failures, and which brings him to the edge of sanctity. It has been suggested that Bernanos weaves personal and fictional themes together in the creation of a character who speaks across the years of crisis of the twentieth century Church and the modern priesthood.

In juxtaposing two different priests representing two different eras of formation, two different outlooks and experiences, the curé de Torcy and the young curé d'Ambricourt, Bernanos marks the transition in French Catholicism from one articulation of the pastoral priesthood to another. The curé de Torcy is a bluff countryman who glories in the Flemish heritage of that part of France. Like the young curé of Ambricourt he knows what it is to suffer unjustly at the hands of his flock. Marked with a strong social conscience and a care for the poor, he had been removed from serving a mining parish at the instigation of *paysans bien pensants*, for attempting to teach the doctrine of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's encyclical on the condition and rights of workers issued in 1891.⁶ He had undergone a brief spell of studies at the élite seminary of Saint Sulpice but, appalled by its austerity and the cold rigidities of its way of life, he had succeeded in having himself expelled. The prospect of not being a priest had prompted him to thoughts of suicide from which he was rescued by his own bishop who admitted him to the local diocesan seminary.⁷ Such rejections had deeply marked him. Despite his bluff and hearty exterior he maintained a deeply sensitive heart which suffered from the profound lack of understanding of those around him.

The curé de Torcy's view of his ministry still has something of the flavour of the *ancien régime*. His view of the young priests of the same generation of the curé of Ambricourt is not altogether positive. In Monsieur de Torcy's younger days there existed *hommes d'Église* who were 'heads of a parish, masters...rulers. They could hold a whole country together...with a mere lift of the chin.'⁸ It is precisely this kind of priest that the young parish priest of Ambricourt cannot be. In an interview with the local Dean of Blangermont, who has come to inspect his accounts, he is rebuked for his lack of administrative sense. He is also given a lecture about the importance of the association between the commercial classes and the Church. The young curé had been heard at a clerical meeting to speak disparagingly of *la commerce* and *les commerçants*. In the Dean's mind the social order has no surer prop than

the Church. The shopkeepers of France are its financial backbone and they must be allowed to see that a relationship between the Church and the bourgeois was mutually beneficial.⁹ The curé's inability to share this vision, to associate himself with the social and political outlook of his priestly colleagues with their credit unions and financial schemes, makes him an isolated and lonely figure who enters into that form of alienation of misunderstanding which has so marked the life of the curé de Torcy.

The vision of the two priests is complementary rather than conflicting. Yet, Bernanos presents Torcy's way as belonging to the irrecoverable past. It is significant that at the end of their last meeting M de Torcy leaves the young curé's house greatly burdened and shaken by the suicide of his rationalist friend, Dr Delbende. As the curé remarks:

You're in trouble', he said. 'You must bless me.' And he took my hand and raised it quickly to his brow. Then he was gone. There was certainly a strong wind blowing, but for the first time I saw he hadn't straightened his tall figure: he walked bowed.¹⁰

The curé of Ambricourt was in debt to what he had learned from M de Torcy, but the circumstances of his life, the structure of his world, presented different challenges and demanded different responses.

At the heart of Bernanos' exploration of the essence of the Catholic priesthood is its mystical, supernatural aspect. He is concerned with the interior life of the priest. The form of the diary allows him to uncover the foundations of sacerdotal life. The trials, rejections and failures of the curé's ordinary, unremarkable life, are to become the raw material from which his saintly martyrdom is forged. As he travels deeper into the mystery of his vocation, he is less certain of his own identity, more conscious of the darkness of discipleship and paradoxically more aware of the force of grace which uses him as an instrument of divine reconciliation. An ever closer unity between the curé and Christ brings him to his final confession as he dies (in the house which a lapsed, former priest friend shares with his mistress) exclaiming 'all is grace.'¹¹ The curé, following the typology of the Epistle to the Hebrews, dies, like his Master, 'outside the camp'.

The community of image between the curé and his divine master has often been noted.¹² The book opens with the curé reflecting on his parish soaked by a thin drizzling rain, scarred by poverty, and deeply sunk in *ennui*, which is inadequately translated as boredom. It is this *ennui* which is eating away at his parish like a cancer. The theme of his own death from a devouring stomach cancer appears on the very first page. He advances into his own death as he pours himself out in an abandon of love for his parish; a community which does not understand him, which

fails to take him entirely seriously, and which, while dimly conscious of his spiritual gifts, in the end rejects him. His parish, as he says, is a parish like all of the rest. It is a microcosm, a kind of sacramental representation of the religious life of France. The parish, just like France, can only be restored to the fullness of life and hope through the practise of Christianity. This restoration cannot come about through schemes, through identification with a dominant or cultural vision, or a quest in search of relevance, but only through individual sanctity. The curé of Ambricourt was criticised by his contemporaries for his abstraction from reality. Bernanos has also been criticised by priestly commentators for creating his hero in this mould. The curé would not seem to fulfil the modern ideal of the priesthood. He is not a good administrator, he often appears socially inept and over-sincere, his preaching is unremarkable and makes his parishioners smile. Neither is he too closely associated with the solemn celebration of the sacraments; rarely does he mention in his diary his celebration of daily mass, and only once does he refer to assisting at high mass as deacon. On the other hand, the curé does believe in the sacrament of penance. Many of his encounters relate to his liberation of a sinner from the icy grip of the self-hatred which has plunged them into the rebellion of sin. Most of Bernanos' priestly heroes take seriously this cure of souls. Significantly, it is only the modernist, unbelieving, scholarly anti-hero of *L'Imposture*, the Abbé Cénabre who insists on his daily celebration of mass.¹³ The key to the curé's character is that he puts on Christ so intimately as to become the sacramental expression of Christ the Good Shepherd to his flock. This process is accomplished through the action of self-emptying love which brings him to the final act of adoration which constitutes his own death. What are the roots of this sacerdotal vision?

During their last interview the curé de Torcy gives the curé of Ambricourt some sound advice,

'Work away', he said, keep at the little day-to-day things, patiently ...The prayer of little things is innocent. In each little thing there is an angel.¹⁴

The reference here to Thérèse of Lisieux and her 'little way' is obvious. Guy Gaucher has traced many of the influences of Sainte Thérèse on Bernanos, especially in the similarities drawn between her and the innocent Chantal de Clergerie in his novel *La Joie*.¹⁵ Bernanos sees in Thérèse, as in Jeanne d'Arc, that joyful abandonment to the defence of truth which characterises the new expression of chivalry. All of his heroes and heroines are those who risk all in their total obedience to God and their refusal to be complicit in the lies that form such an essential

part of the fabric of society that surrounds them. Thérèse entered Carmel to save sinners and to support the work of priests with her life of prayer and sacrifice. In *La Joie* the innocent Chantal offers herself for the salvation of the faithless priest the Abbé de Cénabre. In the same way Thérèse offered her own spiritual sacrifices for the conversion of the convicted murderer Pranzini. The curé too offers himself for the members of the flock that God has entrusted to him. He, as with all of Bernanos' heroes, enters into Christ's victimhood in the fullest measure possible. In the communion of saints which is the Church it is possible for representative figures to take on themselves the burdens of the failures and mediocrity of others. The suffering members of Christ's body are thus united with him in a particular way. In this way the curé comes to see himself as sharing in the mystical, continual, actualisation of the work of the redemption. He comes to see himself as a 'prisoner of the sacred agony'.

The truth is that my place for all time has been Mount Olivet.¹⁶

The theological tone of Bernanos' treatment of the priestly vocation and its association with some themes in the writings of Thérèse of Lisieux can be traced to a common ancestor, Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1618), a seminal figure in the French school of spirituality of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Bérulle was a theologian and controversialist, who founded the French Oratory and exercised a great influence over Vincent de Paul, Jean Eudes and Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of Saint Sulpice. Throughout his life, Bérulle's overriding concern was for a reformed and renewed Catholic priesthood. His interest was shared by his successor as superior of the French Oratory, Charles de Condren (1588–1641) Condren, like Bérulle, was predominantly Augustinian in his theological preferences, although slightly more pessimistic than his master the Cardinal about humanity and its destiny. His dominant stress was on the necessity of self-sacrifice which draws the individual into complete abandonment, ending in a form of annihilation. All of these are motifs which are to appear in Bernanos and in the literature of the nineteenth century French Carmel. Bérulle is also known for his introduction of the Teresian Carmel into France. What attracted Bérulle to the Teresian enterprise was its spirit of interiority, its Marian devotion, its austerity and obedience.¹⁷

Bérulle was named Vicar General for all of the French Carmels and came to regard them as a means for reforming the French Church. He took a keen interest in all of their enterprises and they were to be

extremely receptive to his own theological opinions, which were developed in dialogue with the Carmelite tradition. The strong tone of the French Carmels, even those restored in the nineteenth century, was Bérullian. His spirit is also detected in many nineteenth century French religious congregations. It is primarily Christocentric and incarnational, emphasising the firm unity between the individual and the Word made Flesh. In the French Carmelite tradition God was to be glorified through dedication to the hidden life in which the individual suffered and sacrificed for the Lord Jesus. Prayer and sacrifice were substitutionary in nature, the religious offered herself as a sacrifice to the divine justice making up for the penance sinners do not perform. Through this form of austere and hidden crucified life the Carmelite nun, especially, is involved in the continuance and completion in some mysterious way of the mediating work of Christ. This strand of spirituality is the common ancestry of both Bernanos and Thérèse of Lisieux, although Thérèse revolutionises it in her 'little way'.

For Bérulle the only appropriate relation of the creature to its creator is adoration, acknowledgement of the majesty and grandeur of God and the littleness of the creature. Acknowledgement of the majesty of God does not proceed from direct insight into his mysteries, but is acquired by the daily recollection of human nothingness and frailty.¹⁸ The unfathomable gap between the divine majesty and the creature has been bridged by the incarnate Word who offers perfect adoration to his Father in his humanity. When we adore the Father, whose children we are by grace, we share in that same adoration of the Son. In his incarnation the Son has taken to himself in his human nature the totality of human actions and human states, healing that corruption which stemmed from the original rebellion of the first created couple. The entire historical process of human development and experience, save sin, has therefore been touched by Christ through whom all things were made. This includes development in the womb, birth, infancy, joy, sorrow, pain, agony and death. These particular experiences are the perfect filial expression of the fundamental attitude of the divine adorer. They also have an abiding power in the form of graces which can be applied to individual Christians. We participate in the grace of Christ in two ways, through the universal and the particular. The particular form is by the vocation of certain individuals to be drawn and united to him through a special participation in the particular mysteries of his life, some are drawn to him in his infancy, others in his experience of the desert, and others, like the curé of Ambricourt, in his agony in Gethsemani.¹⁹ The mysteries of Christ's humanity continue to be represented, in a kind of sacramental form, in the responses of these individuals to the particular

grace which is offered to them. In the case of the experience of agony the relationships is to the drama of Christ's filial obedience in pouring out his life for the life of the world. There is an appropriateness in the association of the priestly ministry with the self-emptying of the Incarnation as exemplified in the darkness of the garden of agony.

Bérulle operates with a high theology of priesthood which he finds in the mystery of the priesthood of Christ. Christ is the model and 'organ' of the Christian priesthood, which he directly instituted in his act of dying to pour out his spirit and to give his body to his Church.²⁰

According to Bérulle, Jesus continues to be present in two ways, firstly in the Eucharist, which is seen as a kind of extension of the Incarnation. The second mode of presence is in the person of his priests. The association of the priest with the Eucharist is based on an act of renunciation, of 'impersonalisation', which prompts the priest to lay aside his own private personality in order to adhere to Christ, enabling him to offer an act of perfect homage to God. Such an action requires not technique but sanctity. The role of the priest is to yearn for souls so that Jesus Christ may be formed in them. Bérulle then goes on to speak in high terms of the priest as a 'conjoined instrument' of Christ, who through this ministry enjoys a function higher than that of the angels.²¹ The priest is the supreme servant of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, a co-operator in the work of salvation who, in turn, awakens the spirit of priesthood in the members of Christ's body the Church. As this theory was later developed in the Sulpician school of priestly spirituality, the priest is not the sole possessor of the grace of Christ, Christ lives in all of the faithful by his spirit. The priest is the one who continues the life of Jesus Christ as head of the Church. This headship is expressed in service, and this service springs from the renunciation of self which leads to the transparency in grace of the individual priest so that people may see only Jesus.²²

The climactic scene in the *Journal* is the curé's encounter with the countess. The château in Ambricourt represents the decline of the French aristocracy. Under a carapace of civility, culture and conventional religion lurk lies, hypocrisy, lust, anger and self-hatred. The curé penetrates the dark, cold heart of this moribund institution and liberates it by his transparent honesty and goodness. The countess, trapped in a loveless marriage with an unfaithful husband, hated by her daughter to whom she cannot show any affection, is deeply burdened by the loss in infancy of her only son. Her passionate grieving love for her son has poisoned the wells of her own natural affection. The curé confronts and exposes this wound with a dogged, childlike, persistence which the countess recognises. He tells her that her hatred is directed against

herself. In Bernanos' scheme of things there is nothing worse than self-hatred; it is a peculiarly modern fault. Eventually, the young priest brings the countess to the realisation that her peace and happiness lies in a return to the order of true charity, to its author which is God. As he says to the countess,

God is not to be bargained with. We must give ourselves up to Him unconditionally. Give Him everything, He will give you back even more ...²³

When he delivers himself of this he feels as if an invisible rampart has been breached so that grace pours in from every side. The cost is to his own peace and tranquillity. In giving hope to the countess his own is to be sorely tried, even though he has penetrated more deeply the mystery of charity and come to see that his own spiritual paternity is a share in God's own paternity.²⁴ In Bernanos' view, expressed through the words of the curé of Ambricourt, there are not two separate kingdoms, one for the living and one for the dead. 'There is only God's kingdom, living or dead, and we are all therein.'²⁵ The metaphysical unity of the kingdom becomes apparent in the transparency of the priestly ministry. This is the fundamental theme of Bernanos' greatest novel. As he said himself:

I hope that my kind curé will by my interpreter and my advocate with many Catholics who know nothing of me at all, and who might be taken in by certain appearances.²⁶

- 1 *Cahier VII, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1997) Vol .VI, p 490.
- 2 Malcolm Scott, *The Struggle for the Soul of the French Novel: French Catholic and Realist Novelists, 1850–1970* (London, 1989), p 239.
- 3 Georges Bernanos, *Sous le soleil de Satan* (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961) Vol. I, p 235. Further references to the works of Bernanos will be drawn from the Pléiade edition unless otherwise noted.
- 4 Alan R. Clark, *La France dans l'Histoire selon Bernanos* (Paris, 1983), p 9.
- 5 Albert Béguin, *Bernanos* (Paris, 1982), p 149.
- 6 *Journal*, p 1075.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p 1043.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 1037.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 1081.
- 10 Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (London, 1977), p 167.
- 11 *Journal* p 1259.
- 12 Ernest Beaumont, 'Le sens christique de l'oeuvre romanesque de Bernanos', *Études Bernanosiennes*, 3/4, *La Revue de Lettres Modernes*, nos., 81–84, 1963, pp 85–106.
- 13 Nicole Winter, 'Conception Bernanosienne du Sacerdoce à partir du *Journal d'un curé de campagne*', *ibid.*, nos 67–68, 1961, pp 57–83, p 65.
- 14 *Journal*, p 1192 (my translation).
- 15 Guy Gaucher, 'Bernanos et Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus', *Études Bernanosiennes*, *op.cit.*, nos. 56–57, 1960, pp 229–268.

- 16 *Journal* p 1187.
- 17 Yves Krumenacker, *L'école française de spiritualité: des mystiques, des fondateurs, des courants et leurs interprètes*, (Paris, 1998), p 132.
- 18 P Pourrat, *Christian Spirituality, Later Developments: From the Renaissance to Jansenism* (London, 1927), p329.
- 19 John Saward, 'Bérulle and the French School', in eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold SJ, *The Study of Spirituality* (London, 1986), pp 382–96.
- 20 'Pierre de Bérulle', in ed Michel Dupuy, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1996), Vol. IV, p 409.
- 21 Bérulle, *Oeuvres*, p 413.
- 22 Krumenacker, *op cit.*, p 402.
- 23 *Diary of a Country Priest*, p 133.
- 24 *Journal*, p 1170.
- 25 *Diary of a Country Priest*, p 133.
- 26 Albert Béguin, *Bernanos par lui-même* (Paris, 1954), p 175.

Illumination in Georges Bernanos

Richard Barrett

Given recent receptivity to the importance of aesthetics and the role of art and the imagination, an examination of an artist who managed to arrive at creative expression not in spite of faith but because of that faith will be both useful and, one hopes, inspiring.¹ Georges Bernanos was to the early part of this century what Olivier Messaien has become to the rebirth of Opera today and is the chosen subject of this study for similar reasons. Even a cursory reading of the best known novel of Bernanos, the *Diary of a Country Priest*, will initiate the reader who is otherwise ill-versed in the central preoccupations of French literature or unlettered in the complexities of Catholic spirituality, into an entirely different perspective on the function of the novel and the drama of human redemption. For in a world of peer-assessment, target-determination, performance-related pay, this story as others from the Bernanos collection can contribute to the unravelling of the activism and success-ethic that lies at the heart of our conception of what it means to achieve fulfilment and self-awareness. Fifty years after the death of Bernanos, it is not too late to set our sights on this most original of French authors for a repristination of the function of the novel and the way that the supernatural can make a contribution to that