

Living Holocausts: celebrating this Year of Priests through Literature

*Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne,-
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.*

James Russell Lowell

Jonah mistakenly tried to flee God and sail away to Tarshish from Jaffa though finally he submitted to the Will of God. Jeremiah had to contend with remaining single throughout his life; God had asked as much from him (*Jeremiah 16:1*). Hosea, before both Jeremiah and Jonah, had to repeatedly forgive and tolerate an unfaithful wife. Their lives have become patterns for future times; in what Nietzsche terms as ‘the transvaluation of values’. The Prophets, both Major and Minor, show how Yahweh often chooses the frailest of vessels and in the spirit of the later Magnificat “He casts the mighty from their thrones /and raises the lowly” (*The Divine Office*). The Prophetic life is a sign against the times; a sign that God keeps ‘watch above his own’. Priests are to our times what the Prophets were of old. They are, like the Prophets, men much misunderstood by the laity; cleft by loneliness and unreasonable expectations, broken apart by the superficial popular idealization of their vocations and jettisoned by forces which have hardly any relationship with God. Yet they are different from you and I; they have been transformed by the breathe of God. While you or I may turn to our spouses when someone insults us at the workplace or when we have a headache, a Priest has none to turn to. He only has God, who at most times for all practical purposes keeps silent. It is easy to speak of God, but hard to live the consecrated life. More importantly when I can enjoy a sunset or some classical music with my wife, my Priest friends have none comparable to share their euphoria with. They radically and existentially experience the feeling of total emptiness that Christ experienced on the Cross crying out “*My*

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Literature has been, and remains a silent witness to the paradoxical nature of the Priesthood. The irony of being touched by God in a world which has abandoned Him is shown in the following three books.

Graham Greene is now recognized as an author whose love for his Catholic Faith is undeniable. His understanding for the Priestly calling is deep and humane. In his classic *The Power and the Glory* (1940), we encounter the heroic yet all too human priest. While many priests have reneged on their Faith in the face of a tireless and merciless communist regime in Latin America, our hero simply cannot desert his Faith or his unique Call from God. Nothing is in black and white in this book. We see life through the heartaches of this Priest; his humanity often coming in the way of his fulfilling the special demands of his Vocation. He is hunted down as a common criminal, like his Master, and shot by a military squad. At the end of the novel another Priest arrives to take his place. God's Kingdom is more grit and suffering than what idealized hagiographies would want us to believe. Greene's novel will sensitize us to the unbearable pain of being a living holocaust for God. This is the real fiat lived by Priests all over the world today.

The story of a vibrant Columbia graduate deciding to become a Trappist monk and priest still makes for interesting reading. In his autobiography written in the form of a first-person-narrated novel, we encounter the intellectually brilliant Thomas Merton. We find in the *Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) another dimension of the priestly life. This book is more about the first flush of zeal and the changes in life one has to make to become a priest. Before his conversion Merton had what we would now call a 'cool' life; he partied long; had his fair share of women-friends and liked the 'good life'. Then one day reading about the life

of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he realized his Call. From that moment he was a changed man. He penned down in this book which still regularly tops bestseller charts all over the world, the agony and the ecstasy of renouncing the world and emptying oneself for the sake of God's Kingdom. Legendary professors and literary critics like Mark Van Doren flit through this book making it sparkle with an intellectual fervor absent in most books of this sort.

Diary of a Country Priest by George Bernanos has never gone out of print. He chronicles the life of a parish priest posted in rural France. The Priest in question is innately saintly but has to struggle with his own abiding sense of failure and inadequacy. His parishioners expect too much from this one man. While they confide in him, he cannot tell them of his doubts. It is the same today for the untiring parish priest as it was then. While the parishioner has his emotional life nurtured, the beleaguered and neglected parish priest has none to appreciate and nurture his own spirit. Like Christ he is hounded by the demons of friendlessness, lack of security and an attendant restlessness. The parish priest is forgotten when he is transferred. This is the enigma of the Prophetic life.

The wonder of the Priesthood is that in spite of all these hardships and more, the loneliness, the silent acceptance of various small humiliations, the petty politicking etc. men of goodwill still enter the seminaries. They wholeheartedly accept their Calls from Jesus and unstintingly agree to share their lives with us and their Lord. In the end, the Priest cannot but wholly depend on God. From Him will come their soul's solace for just beyond the dim unknown, standeth none other than God to keep watch over His own.

We of all religions can only marvel at them. They are living signs of God's Covenant with man in a world which refuses to pray or listen to the voice of the Master anymore.