

The Priesthood in Greenland

Graham Greene's life has long been shaded in mystery. Each new biography brings new revelations of spying, mental illness, suicide attempts, drug-use and sexual voracity but the cumulative effect is merely further confusion. In the words of one reviewer: "the doubts, suspicions and aspersions cast since Greene's death in 1991 won't likely ever be cleared".

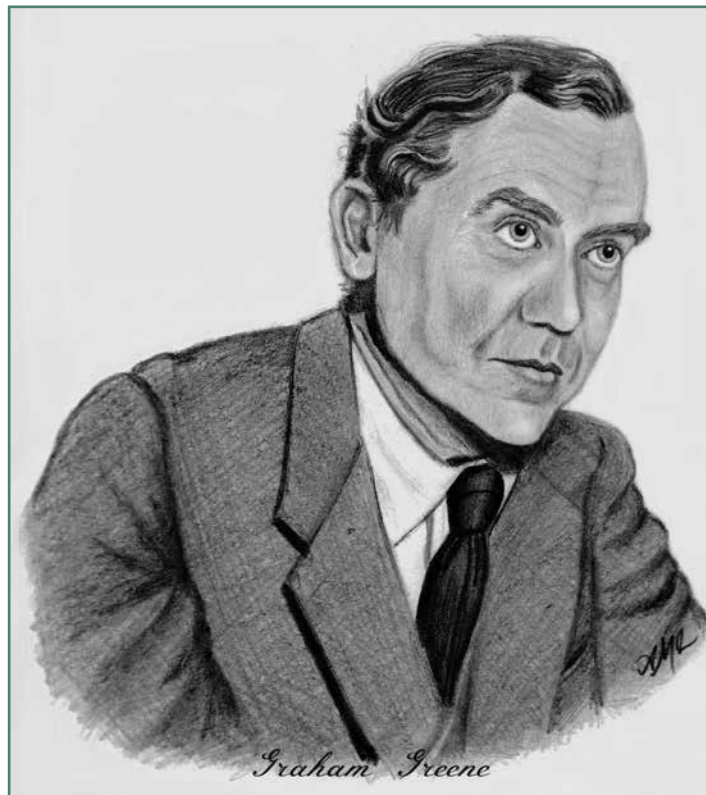
Despite his reception into the Catholic Church in 1926, his faith has never been a simple matter. Critics have accused him of Jansenism, Augustinian Catholicism and Pelagianism, while he further muddied the waters by describing himself as a "Catholic-atheist". In many ways, he was a very famous example of that mythological figure—a Catholic on the margins. He lived in an irregular relationship with Yvonne Cloetta, a married woman, and seemed to delight in all manner of heterodox opinions.

Towards the end of the third volume of his exhaustive biography, Norman Sherry simply concluded: "it is difficult to know Greene's real feelings towards Catholicism". However, in the same volume he argued: "Greene's truth lies in his fiction." In the midst of all this complexity and intrigue, Greene's writing certainly provides a telling insight into his Catholicism.

As he admitted to his friend and interviewer, Marie-Françoise Allain towards the end of his life, "there does exist a pattern in my carpet constituted by Catholicism, but one has to stand back in order to make it out." It is a worthwhile exercise.

A good place to start is with *Ways of Escape* (1980), the second volume of his memoirs published in the last decade of his

life. A significant portion of the book deals with his travels through Mexico in 1938, a journey he describes as his emotional conversion. "It was in Mexico . . . that I discovered some emotional belief among the empty and ruined churches from which the priests had been excluded, at the secret Masses of Las Casas celebrated without the Sanctus bell, among the swaggering pistoleros."



Amidst the chaos of his life, this experience of the persecuted Church proved truly formative. As late as 1983 he explained: ". . . when one has been with believers who suffered for their faith—the Masses said in secret in Chiapas, and Tabasco . . . —this endowed the Church with such grandeur, the fidelity of the believers assumed such proportions that I couldn't help being pro-

foundly moved . . . religion was the peasant approaching the altar on his knees, his arms outstretched as though crucified". The result of this experience was a consistent belief in the efficacy of the priesthood, the sacraments and in particular, the real presence.

The most detailed account of his time in Mexico came in *The Lawless Roads* (1939) where he described meeting young Miguel Darío Miranda, Bishop of Tulancingo, who would later be Cardinal Archbishop of Mexico City. Bishop Miranda told him, "It was the duty of priests and bishops to die." He also met Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, "who had worked the miracle of the Eucharist now for fifty years. He came gently down, bitter, kindly, Pickwickian: the dangerous man. They had put him on an aeroplane with detectives in 1932—he was allowed to take nothing but his breviary—and dumped him across the border".

In these bishops and the numerous priests "ill at ease in their lay suits" Greene encountered a Church entirely devoted to evangelization centering on the sacraments. The impression remained with him. One of the more perceptive Greene scholars, Mark Bosco pointed out that even Greene's doubting priests in *The Honorary Consul* and *Monsignor Quixote* were still in "an ontologically different category of human being . . . [and that] Greene's imagination remain[ed] gripped by the cultic function of the Catholic liturgy and its priests who serve the Church; together they embodied the essential legacy of Catholic difference".

In *Stamboul Train* (1932) Dr. Paul Czinner is returning to Belgrade and to certain

death. On the train he encounters an erudite Anglican clergyman named Mr Opie. When Czinner, “his lips dry with the literal thirst for righteousness”, clumsily raises the question of confession, Opie can only speak theoretically rather than efficaciously. He glibly approaches the question from a psychological and later a literary angle. But the result is that Czinner leaves the compartment angry and unshriven and in the darkness of the hallway hears a voice crying “impossible, impossible”. In contrast, the priests of Greenland are often faithless, feckless, and even foolish but they are very much Catholic priests in the line of Melchizedek.

The priests of Greenland are often faithless, feckless and even foolish but they are very much Catholic priests in the line of Melchizedek.

In *The Power and the Glory* (1940) the depressed whiskey priest is contrasted with the upstanding and even ascetic Communist Lieutenant who builds iron swings for the children where the Cathedra used to stand. En-route to his execution the whiskey priest explains to his nemesis the reality conferred by ordination: “it doesn’t matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God into a man’s mouth just the same—and I can give him God’s pardon. It wouldn’t make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me.”

In *The Quiet American* (1955) the priest with his soutane speckled with blood was a recurring image. Greene consistently links the liturgical and social function of the priest. Even the cynical atheist Fowler is impressed: “I’ve seen a priest, so poor he hasn’t a change of trousers, working fifteen hours a day from hut to hut in a cholera epidemic, eating nothing but rice and salt fish, saying his Mass with an old cup—a

wooden platter. I don’t believe in God and yet I’m for that priest.”

In *The Honorary Consul* (1973), Father Rivas has abandoned the priesthood for a life of political violence: “once a priest always a priest, Father. I spotted you when you broke those eggs over the dish. I could see you at the altar, Father”. In the face of imminent danger, Father Rivas’s “wife” Marta begs him to resume his sacramental role “we need you to speak to God for us”.

During his travels in Mexico, Greene was in awe of priests daily risking death to perform the miracle of the Eucharist. “The Mass is forbidden in the churches; only in the secrecy of a private house can the daily genuine miracle be performed.” Greene’s own faith in the Eucharist was undoubtedly shaped by the experience. We can see it in his bald prose: “. . . during the Calles persecution God had lain in radio cabinets, behind bookshelves. He had been carried in a small boy’s pocket into prisons; He had been consumed in drawing-rooms.”

This same language of simple faith occurs in many of his novels. In *The Power and the Glory* the whiskey priest says Mass in a village as the soldiers close in on him. “Whoever moved outside on the forest path, there was no movement here—*Hoc est enim Corpus Meum*. He could hear the sigh of breaths released: God was here in the body for the first time in six years. When he raised the Host he could imagine the faces lifted like famished dogs.”

In *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), Scobie damns himself by blasphemously receiving Communion while in a state of mortal sin. In doing so he is fully aware of the reality of the Sacrament. Even though it is now a hellish experience, the Sacrament is still very real. “*Hoc est enim Corpus*: the bell rang, and Father Rank raised God in his fingers—this God as light now as a wafer whose coming lay on Scobie’s heart as heavily as lead.”

In his final explicitly Catholic novel, *Monsignor Quixote* (1982), Greene maintains his unambiguous way of discussing the sacraments. The old Monsignor is challenged by the Communist Mayor, “I know Marx and Lenin existed. You only believe.” To which Quixote replies, “I tell you it’s not a question of belief. I touch him.” When his faculties are suspended, Quixote calls it “the sentence of death”.

In a very autobiographical short story “A Visit to Morin” (1959), the narrator has a chance encounter with the troubled Catholic novelist Pierre Morin at Christmas Mass.

Morin is clearly a stand-in for Greene. In his conversation with the reclusive and misunderstood old writer, the narrator discovers that his hero has lost his belief and yet he has retained his faith. Why? Because his disbelief has separated him from the sacraments and the results seemed to prove their power. “For twenty years I have been without the sacraments and I can see the effect. The wafer must be more than a wafer.” In Greene’s fiction, even the doubters are still moved by the reality of the sacraments.

Since his death Greene’s biographers have been almost exclusively concerned with understanding the chaos surrounding the poor man’s life. In one of his final inter-

Since his death Greene’s biographers have been almost exclusively concerned with understanding the chaos surrounding the poor man’s life.

views entitled “Why I am Still a Catholic” (1989), Greene moved between explaining this chaos in his private life and relentlessly (at times hysterically) criticizing Catholicism from almost every angle. Yet he still concluded in the final question that his religion remained “a mystery which cannot be destroyed”. Perhaps a far more interesting question for biographers is what to make of a faith so irrevocably shaped by his brief experience of a persecuted church; a faith able to survive such chaos.

Paul Chigwidden is a high school teacher living on a small farm in rural Australia with a wife, four children, and an assortment of animals both domesticated and wild.