REDUCING YOURSELF TO ZERO

Jean Sulivan's *Anticipate Every Goodbye*

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> In itself religion is conservative; it emphasizes the fear of death, protection against evil, and a taste for the miraculous as an escape from reality. The Gospel, in contrast, implies constant revolution, rousing those who hear it from the sleep of fable and magic, as well as from any political absolute.[1]

THE AUTHOR OF THIS QUOTATION was a priest named Joseph Lemarchand, who wrote under the pen-name of Jean Sulivan (1913-1980). It comes from his spiritual journal, and the contrast he makes here between religion and the Gospel was one that haunted him throughout his career. It was in his book *Anticipate Every Goodbye*,[2] a memoir of his relationship with his mother, that he explored this contrast most fully.

Sulivan stood within a rich tradition of Catholic novel-writing, whose main exponents in France were François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos and Julien Green, and he was well capable of writing prose that could win literary prizes. In 1964, for example, one of his ten novels, *Mais il y a la mer*, won the *Grand Prix catholique de littérature*. Yet this tradition of Catholic novels had begun to wane by the time Sulivan began to publish in the 1950s, and he was conscious that the human situation after the trauma of two world wars demanded something different. He wrote in his *Petite littérature individuelle*:

> It could be that genius cannot be imitated, or that former cultural and religious signs have become outdated to such a degree that

[1] *Morning Light: The Spiritual Journal of Jean Sulivan*, translated by Joseph Cunneen and Patrick Gormally (New York: Paulist, 1988), 65.

[2] *Anticipate Every Goodbye* (Dublin: Veritas, 2000) is this author's translation of *Devance tout adieu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). All subsequent references to this work will appear in the text, with the page number in brackets.

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> they can only communicate with a public living in the past. Spiritual writers today, it seems to me, are either out of touch or forced to renew themselves and follow a new direction, or else they have to become resigned to silence.[3]

Sulivan evoked the spiritual reality of the 1960s and 1970s in France through a different kind of writing: disjointed narratives with marginal characters who keep on searching for God in a world unfavourably disposed to traditional religious practice. In his famous *Diary of a Country Priest*, Georges Bernanos had shown how Catholicism was losing the fight against secular forces in the rural parishes of France. A few decades later, the situation of organized religion was appreciably worse. For Sulivan, this was not necessarily a bad thing. As far as he was concerned, the Word continued to reach the minds and hearts of the 'few' who were capable of appreciating its breath and rhythm. He wrote in *Morning Light*, his spiritual journal:

> And why should the Gospels be readily accepted? Breath, rhythm, gesture, parable and paradox—poems—are at once simple and secret, and can only be gradually unveiled. … The poem of the Gospel deals with existence and is intended to rise like yeast. Its style is just the opposite of a message that tries to control our lives with slogans and principles.[4]

His own writing was an attempt to prolong the Word, with its call for uprooting and rebirth, paradox and questioning. He aspired towards the poetic quality that he found in the Gospels; his writing depends on the reader to unravel its hidden meaning, and only then can it 'rise like yeast' and transform the way we look on the world. As he wrote, once more in *Morning Light*:

> I wanted so badly to cleanse myself of formalism, to be cured of taboos and guilt feelings. I tried to provide a passageway for a Word that never left me in peace. I was tied to it, married to it, indissolubly.[5]

[3] *Petite littérature individuelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 142.
[4] *Morning Light*, 22.
[5] *Morning Light*, 8-9.

This passion for the breath and rhythm of the Gospel, with the fragile and yet powerful humanity that it contains, is evident in his memoir about his mother, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*. The reality of death—what Sulivan once calls 'God's other name'[6]—is the principal test of a person's faith. The mystical journey is about crossing the threshold of death where the revelation of God's love becomes known. Here, elaborate word play and admirable prose appear trivial. Sulivan was more concerned with being true to his 'inner music', a music that would not necessarily appeal to many:

> It is possible that the music of my books is not made for you. One comes across numerous and diverse melodies in books that are only suited to the *small number* capable of responding to their call.[7]

In *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, he expressed the point like this:

> The world is full of books, books with buckets of talent displayed in them, well-constructed phrases that could be sweet or sharp as a razor blade, admirable. In such works dazzling things are offered to you, mirrors in which the fundamental boredom of the aesthetes is reflected. I preferred books that had a bit of everything, that were difficult to grasp and that permitted you to lose yourself in order to find a new you. In them I could hear the untamed interior voice that cries out in every human being, a heartbeat, a sign of life. You are not meant to admire these books but to start afresh because of them. (p. 84)

Looking Forward to Death

Sulivan evidently had no interest in 'art for art's sake'. He wanted to bring about a reawakening in his readers, some of whom, he hoped, would 'start afresh' after being exposed to what he has to say. *Anticipate Every Goodbye* attempts to provoke his readers in this way by offering a narrative of his own most primal relationship, his relationship with his mother. It covers his youth in Brittany, his vocation to the priesthood, and, most importantly, the death of his mother.

The account begins with Sulivan driving down from Rennes on one of his weekly Sunday visits to his mother, now in her seventies. As

[6] *Morning Light*, 66.
[7] *Miroir Brisé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 51.

he turns the corner and sees the village tower of Montauban and the familiar landscape of his native Brittany, his mind jumps forward to his mother's funeral, when he, as the eldest child, will walk at the front of the cortège towards what they call 'the valley of Jehosaphat', the local village cemetery. Some day he knows she will not be there to greet him, a thought that fills him with anguish. As he drives up to the house, he notes with relief: 'Everything's alright this time round. I can make out Mother's shadow moving about through the curtains.' (p. 10) They are not too 'demonstrative' in their family:

> I kiss my mother at the root of her hair. I will kiss her like this on her deathbed. She won't return my kiss, no more than she does now; that is the custom we have adopted. Everything takes place on the inside. (p. 10)

Sulivan's wonderfully controlled prose here manages to capture in a few lines the type of relationship that exists between this simple peasant and her son, the cultivated writer-priest. They appear slightly distant from one another. They are not the sort of people who throw their arms around one another and give a public display of their affection. Their feelings go deep: 'everything takes place on the inside'.

Jean Sulivan

From the beginning of his account, Sulivan lets the reader know that his mother is going to die. There is much toing and froing between past, present and future as the picture is built up of a relationship that has undergone trauma and despair.

The first great blow to the happiness of both mother and son came with the death of Sulivan's father on the Western Front in 1914, a year after Sulivan's birth. Sulivan looked on himself in later life as someone who suffered from a complex of being a fatherless child, the child of a dead man. The image of M. Lemarchand leaving his young wife and child would

linger in his son's mind for many years: 'I suspect that as he was heading to the station across the paths he was saying goodbye to the land with the soles of his shoes' (p.24). The soldier harboured no illusions about the fate that was awaiting him, and knew that he would in all likelihood never see his family again. When the news of his death finally reached Sulivan's mother, she became a broken woman. She had lost a man she loved dearly.

But when the landlord shortly afterwards doubled the rent of her farm arbitrarily, Angèle (as the mother was called) saw no option but to remarry in order to hold on to the lease. Her son, used to having his mother all to himself, was rocked by the news of the remarriage. He describes how he avoided the wedding ceremony and was found in the woods by a neighbour, who dragged him to the house where the reception was taking place:

> I know that mother is getting married today. I must be feeling shame, fear and emptiness. … I know that for years I carried a deep scar inside me, a scar that wouldn't leave me and to which I couldn't even give a name. (p.52)

As he is brought towards Fontaines Noires, their farm, he sees his mother getting up from the table with a face 'filled with sadness'.

Later in life, Sulivan would understand his mother's reasons for remarrying, but the perception that she had in some way abandoned him and betrayed the memory of his dead father was hard to eradicate. There were obvious Oedipal tensions aroused, as the young child was forced to cede his place to a stranger who came and established himself in their home. It is significant that the Sunday visits which Sulivan describes with such tenderness took place when his mother was once more a widow and the children of the second marriage had grown up and left home. Once again, it was just the two of them on their own. Sulivan acknowledges that his stepfather was an honourable man. He was never able to call him 'father', but he did respect him. In his view, his mother never had the same love for this man as she had had for her first husband. Nevertheless, she was always careful to hide the fact: her second husband was the father of two of her children, and she was bound to him by the sacrament of matrimony.

Seminary, Priesthood and Frustration

Angèle was a very pious woman, and she had a strong desire to see her son become a priest. This dream came closer to realisation when young Jean decided to go to the minor seminary, a place he nevertheless described as a 'purgatory' (p.56). Sulivan felt that the training he received in his seminary years was totally inadequate. He repeated in exams and essays what he knew his teachers wanted to hear, but he was critical of what he was receiving:

> Far too few teachers know that you can excel in theology, in spiritual life, even in piety, and still have a heart that is completely hard. (p.56)

Sulivan developed a keen critical faculty at an early stage. He had no desire to become a mere functionary, someone who simply trotted out the Church's line on moral and social issues. He wanted to think things through for himself, to analyze issues, and to question the opinions of his superiors. He was very different from his mother's image of how a priest should behave. She never questioned what priests said in their sermons, and accepted all their pronouncements with humility. Sulivan would criticize sharply the clerical system that encouraged such passivity:

> The priests of this time tended to preach about laws and obligations. In this way they had succeeded in transforming Christianity into something approaching a natural religion. In their eyes the rural order in which the Church still played a dominant role was an expression of the divine will. They had forgotten about freedom, without which there is no real faith. (p.52)

Sulivan resolved never to accept the trappings of power that can come with the priesthood among devout people like his mother. After a number of years as a priest, he came to be convinced that his sermons were merely an exercise in oratory; they contained no sincerely held spiritual convictions. Preaching was a public performance, and one at which he excelled. He had become a major cultural figure in Rennes; he ran a film society and a very successful cultural centre; he edited a local newspaper, *Dialogues-Ouest*; and he taught in the Catholic *lycée*. He was able to present dogma in a modern form, to quote from the specialists, to hide behind the pope's

pronouncements, to explore literature and the new world of cinema, and to hold a congregation spellbound. Often he was congratulated on his sermons. But Sulivan came to realise that he was being dishonest:

> What brought about my downfall or saved me, depending on how you look on it, was this: when I was congratulated for having spoken so beautifully, while I felt the usual sense of pride, I would also feel great sadness, followed by irritation. I could never forget the inherent contradiction in the idea that you can announce the message of the Gospel while at the same time making a career out of it. (p. 59)

What is admirable about Sulivan is his ability not only to sense the hypocrisy of others, but also to see through his own posturing.

However, he was in no doubt about the fortitude and sincerity of his mother's faith. It was a blind, simple faith that helped her endure the vicissitudes of her life. She had difficulty accepting her son's literary vocation, and could not understand why he rarely donned the clerical garb. She wished he would agree to say Mass in the local church so that people could appreciate his sermons (she had heard of his prowess in this regard) and see how clever he was. She did not accept that he had to be so critical of the Church. For example, one day he made a particularly virulent attack on the presence of so many bishops and priests at the local Sea Festival, where there was a ritual blessing of the boats and the sea. His mother loved the pageantry and the way the port was covered in bunting, but her son felt obliged to point out to her that the occasion was organized by the wealthy ship-owners. Christianity had nothing to do with such a sham: it made religion an accomplice in the exploitation of the poorly paid sailors. Just when he felt assured of victory, she said: 'Are you certain that you're not searching for your own comfort in all this? You too want a religion that suits you.' (p. 75) Mothers know their sons in ways that can prove uncomfortable at times.

Blind, simple faith helped Angèle endure

The Onset of Death

Sulivan looked on his mother as his strength and refuge. One day he was frightened and surprised to find himself writing about her in the past tense. Though we are well into the book by the time she is hospitalised, it comes as no surprise. By this point it is 1965. For a long

time he had been anticipating her departure, and had seen every Sunday visit as somehow a rehearsal for this experience. Every time he drove away from the house and saw her waving from the window, he would feel he was saying goodbye to her for the last time. Now, however, he is not anticipating the nightmare, but living it out in truth. The writing assumes a new power. He rushes to catch a train from Paris so that he can be at her bedside in Rennes:

> Forms and sounds became dim, the countryside was shifting uncontrollably. Love was like death; I had never known up until this point what it was like to fall into nothingness. (p. 93)

Hope is restored when he arrives and is told that the illness is probably caused by food poisoning. The rash on her face is not encouraging, but that is probably related to a problem with her urea. The immediate reaction is one of relief. There will be more Sunday visits, more opportunities to unburden himself of his traumas.

His joy is short-lived, however. He is advised to bring her to Nantes as problems have developed with her kidneys. They travel down in an ambulance and encounter difficulties finding the admissions building. When they finally are admitted, all the tests have to be done again, all the forms signed, all the same questions answered. She is shivering with the cold, and yet the ambulance driver informs them that she needs to take the gown back to Rennes—hospital regulations are very clear on this point. Indignity is thus added to the pain the poor woman has to endure. Her son feels helpless. For once in his life he regrets not having worn his clerical collar, as it might have obtained better attention for his mother. The intensive care unit, the centre of 'this huge camp of suffering', is disturbing: 'death was palpable here' (p.100).

What upsets Sulivan more than anything is the fact that his mother's faith, rock solid until now, seems to fail her at this crucial moment:

> Only at that precise moment did I realise that she was going to die, that she was replacing Christ on the naked cross, experiencing all the feelings of abandonment. I could see her eyes—I couldn't, I wouldn't read what they were saying. I would only know later. (p.111)

She refuses to pick up the rosary beads that had never left her side throughout her life; when he mentions that she might like to invoke Our Lady of Lourdes, to whom she had a great devotion, she shakes her head. He wonders what is becoming of her, but then he realises that 'in the unseen part of her soul she was still attached to the living and true God' (pp.110-111). But what of his own identity as a priest in this situation? Surely his presence as a priest-son should be a comfort to her at such a time. But he cannot find the words or the gestures to ease her pain and her doubts. The functionary priest cannot function, probably because of the turmoil he is going through. He does discover that the hospital chaplain has heard her confession and given her the Sacrament of the Sick.

The functionary priest cannot function

His mother's condition deteriorates rapidly in Nantes. As there is now no hope that she will recover, the hospital authorities give permission for the woman to be transported home to die. Just as they are putting her into the ambulance, she passes away. Hospital regulations would decree in such circumstances that the patient be brought back inside but the driver agrees to continue, provided that they leave her eyes open. As they drive along the country roads, Sulivan sees the trees and the sky reflected in these eyes. It looks as though she is finally at peace.

Her son is far from peace, however. He sees the move from this life to the vastness of eternity as a disturbing journey filled with pain and doubt. It is hard to leave the familiar world behind, our little possessions, the people we love, the daily routine however mundane. When we are in good health, we do not think about the important issues in life. We prefer to try and earn money and achieve success. But in the end, these things are useless:

> We are all blind, thinking that life consists of possessing material goods, holding on to this, then that, getting to know one thing, then another, trying desperately to ignore the fact that the whole process inevitably amounts to absolutely nothing. Life isn't just a game where you have to possess and know as many things as possible. Rather, it is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way. (p.114)

In today's globalised world, economic concerns dominate our awareness, and prevent our fostering spiritual values that might help us

come to terms with the reality of death. In the wake of his mother's death, Sulivan realises that what he had thought of as faith was nothing more than a collection of ideas—it had not become any real part of him. It was superficial and facile, belonging more to the intellect than to the heart. He slowly begins to see that the gospel message of unconditional love requires people to place themselves in the desert of doubt and apprehension, to take spiritual risks, to know pain at the deepest level. In accompanying his mother on her climb to Golgotha, he experiences at first hand the Passion of Christ. After witnessing the spiritual desolation that Angèle was made to endure, Sulivan decides that he wants nobody apart from medical experts present at his own death. 'It is frightening to show this spectacle to any living person.' (p.113)

When they arrive at the house, Sulivan learns that his mother has prepared everything for her funeral. He has never seen the garden in such a riot of colour. He takes no active part in the concelebrated funeral Mass; he is in a daze. When the undertakers arrive to cover the coffin, he retreats to the garden, where he cries. Rather than making a spectacle of his grief, he wears dark glasses throughout the ceremony. He knows that people must find him hard and aloof. But the pain he experiences is evident from the following lines:

> I am now the son of nobody. I will go now, mother, like an adult, towards my Maker. You were a sign that he existed: I knew through you of His presence. … Now that you are gone, there is nothing more between me and death, that is to say between me and God. Alleluia. Who is that inside me saying this word, Alleluia? (p.120)

Cathartic Pain

What does this memoir, *Anticipate Every Goodbye*, tell us about God, about the transcendent one? It is not immediately obvious that Sulivan reacts to his mother's death by accepting the will of God. His first feeling, a very human one, is that it is not fair that she should die. He reads in Angèle's eyes when she is in the hospital a question addressed to God: 'Why did you make us mortal?' (p.124) But there is a sense in which the pain inflicted on both mother and son is cathartic. Sulivan is forced to work through many of the important issues surrounding faith and his relationship with God, issues which he has not addressed

with any seriousness before this point in his life. He realises that his writing could be a help to others:

> Writing down these anecdotes, expressing ordinary feelings, which quite possibly millions of people secretly feel after seeing their own mother dying, reassures me and comforts me a bit. It sometimes seems to me that my mother is the humble mother of a great number of people. (p. 124)

The great writers are those whose humanity shines through and informs everything that they write. Suffering, frailty, and sensitivity are important elements in both the aesthetic and the Christian paths. By expressing what is most personal to him, Sulivan manages to write a memoir that lives far beyond its own time and place, and will speak to anyone who has had to witness the death of someone they love. He does nothing to sanitise the experience; he describes his mother's death with a raw honesty that is frightening, but ultimately rewarding. What is refreshing about Sulivan is that he is prepared to admit that he does not have any ready-made answers. Instead, his writing is a way of working through the trauma he has endured. The account has none of the feel-good factor of the death-counselling manual. That is because it is up to us to find our own answers about death and eternity, answers that will involve our looking closely at unpalatable and painful realities.

A raw honesty that is frightening, but also rewarding

Christians have to know that their beliefs are based on the reality of the Cross. The gospel message rouses us 'from the sleep of fable and magic'. It is not meant to be comfortable:

> When the Son of Man, who is also the Son of God, cries out that he has been abandoned on the Cross, by what right do you seek reassuring truths? (p. 125)

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