Altered state

Catholicism on a cusp

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THERE'S A MISCHIEVOUS STORY BY THE GREAT SICILIAN writer Leonardo Sciascia which I've managed to mislay for some time now but which remains in my memory as a green fable of compelling humour and wisdom. The telling of it goes more or less like this.

Once upon a time, in the early Cold War era of the infant 1950s, Michele and Filomena are living happily ever after as husband and wife in their ancestral and uncontroversial Roman Catholic village. Michele, a child of the rational enlightenment and a disciple of the beatific utopia envisioned by Marx (surely the most significant Jewish prophet since Jesus) strongly supports the Communist Party of Italy, reads *L'Unità* like a priest intent upon his breviary, and holds in contempt the preconciliar abracadabra of a Latin Christianity which supplements its sacramental voodoo with ludicrous devotional aerobics of one sort or another. Filomena, on the other hand, dedicates much of her available time and adrenalin to the grooming of her parish church and in particular to the cult of her namesake saint enthroned beside the high altar, a sweetening mentor whose intercessions have been fortunate and unfailing for years, a source of favours galore to women and children, priests, pensioners, and, most especially, to the satisfied spouse of the village's principal revolutionary.

In and of itself, this marital asymmetry means very little. Even today Italian wedlock (sometimes more lock than wed as in all jurisdictions) is often polarized along these ancient socio-cultural lines without much grief to bed or board, though the photo-finish death of rival superpower ideologies in the aftermath of 1989 has cleared a scorched field for the search-and-destroy manoeuvres of Darwinian market forces and has made those older squabbles over the sacred scriptures of Christians and Marxists as dated now as any electoral graffiti in the lava-fields of Herculaneum. But the reciprocal mockery of Michele and Filomena does touch and transfigure their lives in ways they cannot have imagined in their slow-motion society. For the bishop of the diocese, who has doubtless been reading some improving literature from GHQ and who relays the intelligence promptly to the local archdeacon,

decides against St Filomena. Her status is suspect, her lineage legendary, and the sacrificial altars of ecclesial modernity therefore determine she must go and go quickly.

Picture poor Filomena. Her plenary protectress has all her life long been a green canopy over her home and her locality. She has been her medium and her mediation. Now the pastel colours of her private devotions are about to be smeared with the black and white of a rationalized spirituality. So she storms the parish church along with all the other matrons in the canton, their children and grandchildren, and they stay there together, in spite of derision, as one dogged sodality, lighting candles, wiping bottoms, and singing hymns to their personal pantheon, though the electricity has been disconnected and the building is surrounded on all sides by that most dangerous of species, the reforming Caucasian male. Chief among the scoffers is, of course, the outraged Michele who believes, as even Marxists may, that his sainted wife is now insane and that her behaviour has, by a kind of sympathetic proxy, implicated his pure proletarian convictions in her delirium.

By a mean ruse which does him no credit he lures her from the church and home again. There, after much assault but no battery, Filomena prepares his food while the pontifex maximus of his own four walls opens up the day's edition of the party journal. Weary of his endless wrestling with plaster-cast cherubs and the endless pathology of superstitious Sicilian faith, he wants to discern the signs of his own timeliness in those grand Soviet annunciations: in newsprint litanies of sputniks and spy planes, in festive novenas for bumper harvests of broccoli, and, most of all, in archangelic obituary tributes to the soul of the faithfully departed Caesar Augustus, Generalissimo Stalin himself, whose apotheosis has preoccupied the Russian state and its satellite affiliates for forty years now in a desert which makes the wilderness of Sinai seem like a child's sandbox.

'What's the matter?' asks Filomena, though she might have said, 'Where's dialectical materialism now?', for her stupefied husband has been stopped short by the principal article in his favourite read. 'What's the matter?' she says, a primitive Christian to whom nothing in its pages could speak as inconsolably as it does to stricken Michele. This broadsheet has always been his good news. Its good news has always been his gospel truth. Now it brings him a coroner's report on the mortal fate of a loved one. 'What's the matter?' she says; and the matter is the end, the end of the world, the whole wide world itself, to this one shortsighted bullyboy whose personal prestige as a dissident voice in a conforming Christian Democrat ward has been sabotaged. The matter

is the oddly liturgical exorcism in what was once Holy Mother Russia of its own Saviour and Redeemer, the continental cleaning of the Augean stables of his murderous and monotheistic rule at the heretical Twenty-Second Party Congress in Moscow, and the sacrilegious expulsion of Comrade Stalin's embalmed cadaver from the Lenin mausoleum in Red Square. The scapegoater par excellence has himself become the black sheep. The lamb of God is exposed as a wolf in sheep's wool.

'What's the matter?' the wife prompts; and Michele, a fallen angel, can only reply: 'Nothing. Nothing at all.' For they are alone, they are on their own now. Their parents, whether starets or tsar, are finally dead and they are fully orphaned. They must stop looking upwards pitiably in their staid cervical collars, in their scrutiny of the skies. They must look around them and downward; they must study the gravity of the ground beneath their feet. 'Nothing. Nothing at all.' Is Michele aware that his answer mirrors the famous response of St John of the Cross when the mystic was invited to summarize the totality of his visionary tours in a single phrase, and he said after much thought: 'Nada, nada, nada'. Nothing, nothing, nothing: an emptiness in which the Spirit of the God of Jesus folds and enfolds us – like a winding sheet, like a swaddling cloth – and a thirst, a hysteria, an uterus, in which we are reconstituted minutely from our tiniest subatomic particles and squeezed again into a renewed world in which the deluge is past, in which delusion is past, and the tilted planet basks in the sanity of the Lord.

If I'm rehearsing Scascia's fable to the point of infringing his copyright, it's because the saga of two demented fidelities – the wife's to a deforming form of godliness in the service of a second-rate theology, the husband's to a godless reformation of a social ideology – which are entangled in the common ruin of their church and statecraft, seems to me to be the plot and paradigm of most of what has been happening over here in Ireland in the last twenty years. And if I presume to take Philomena and Michele so much to heart, it is partly because I am a hermaphroditic version of the two-in-one: old enough on the one hand to have inhaled the almost logarithmic religiosity of the 1950s, its levitical scrupulosity all detail and no depth, and young enough on the other to have passed my puberty in the free-for-all of the later 1960s, when a red-handed indigenous cultural nationalism, the very double of Northern Protestant loyalism, fought for its dynastic life with the ironic forces of European social democracy, as subcommittees

here, there and everywhere in our rejuvenated realm stripped the altars, reinvented practice as praxis, and vernacularized the mass.

So a middle-class child in Dublin who once genuflected in grey school shorts, because the priest in his biretta at the zebra crossing might be carrying viaticum to a patient in the Royal Hospital for the Incurables, would live long enough, light years enough, to make small talk with a joky diocesan ordinand who has slipped off his clerical collar to avoid any more banter or manhandling from the passengers and who is standing outside the toilet of a non-smoking carriage in a shrieking train, pitching his voice against the howling window while the tip of his cigarette sparks like the tail of a comet from his ringless hand, as he pleads for some prayerful interpretation of the present death, descent and resurrection of the Church in Ireland. 'I could stand heartbreak in the Cause of Death column,' he says, 'but not myocardiac infarction. That's an organic datum; it's not a human deed.'

It's a risk to relate an anecdote in such a way that it seems to secrete either an annal or an analysis, because it can't, and it is an even greater risk to entrust it to the mouthpiece of a clerical actor as if Christian authority and sacerdotal power were a binary pair. All the baptized have been capsized together, and the floodwater is more salty and turbulent than the sprinkles of a christening. Onerous as their ministerial and administrative portfolios might be, the religious in Ireland make up only an infinitesimal statistic within the sinking people of God, as they do worldwide, and the bewilderment that we are all trying to clarify at the door of the twenty-first century, as one Christian tradition among others, is quite impervious to the old protocols. That said, it's also true that those in (and out of) religious life in this country have undergone – and indeed have undertaken – a searching of the self, of their mission and mandate, that is Ignatian in its intensity and that is slowly achieving some serenity and a fresh start now, via a ten-year period of demoralization amounting to clinical depression, the surrender of their protective and privileging aura as the darlings of transcendence, the dismantlement of their corporate might, and the apparent absurdity of their service in an era of entrepreneurial individualism in a libertarian order. In the centuries when a prophylactic anti-Semitism maintained a violent Christianity across Europe, any gentile proselyte would be interrogated by a rabbi to fathom his good faith. 'What is your objective? Is it not known to you that today the people of Israel are wretched, driven about, exiled, and in constant suffering?' It's an existential catechesis which the middle member of the Abrahamic family might find itself rehearsing in due course, though few

consecrated Christians would have it otherwise. Indeed, in their experience of the extinction and risenness of ecclesial life, male and female religious have probably come closer to the paschal mystery than in the aplomb and opulence of their earlier tenure when their institutional chic coarsened and corrupted so many.

Now they are homeless. They are bartering their ceiling roses for canvas tents. They are selling monasteries to be refurbished as exclusive hotels, convents to be smartened into luxury apartments, chapels to be floodlit as badminton courts. Seminaries are closing and those that remain open are empty. Religious are not even registered any longer in the residential section of the telephone directory. Instead, they are listed in the business entries, communities and institutes alongside auto repairs and travel agents in a new free-market universe. And if this causes pique, it is nothing to the pathos of an altered world in which male clergy cannot any longer be alone with children in the presbyteries and the parish centres, for propriety's sake, and for the purposes of insurance liability. Small wonder that at times, when I'm working weekends round the country on the live radio broadcasts of eucharists and other liturgies from a legion of churches, I feel like poor Pausanias, the belated second-century AD Hellenistic archivist of all the former shrines and sanctuaries of ancient Greece – Delphi and Delos and laurelled Olympia – where the gods had copulated in the alluvium to raise up human beings in the perfection of form. In the evening of their creeds, on the night of their final dousing, at the shoreline of the new populist tumult called Christianity, an Asiatic phantasm which would replace Greek nudity with Hebraic nakedness, this principled pagan connoisseur must have watched the smoke rise over the corps de ballet of the acolytes and tumble upwards from the altars to the eagles, with a special wistfulness.

It could have been foreseen. The papal mass in the Phoenix Park over twenty years ago was the funeral games of traditional Constantinian Catholicism as we knew it. There, if ever, was the opportunity for an erudite requiem by that bookish Greek. At the time, however, it appeared as a salute to our racial stamina, a celebration of our indigenous mystique as the vital legatees of an incorrupt deposit, lost largely above a certain geographical latitude during the European schism of centuries ago, its purity preserved her by the humility of its terraced adherents through a long posterity. Yet Catholicism was balanced by catholicity, by a conciliar reading of the remit of the Bishop of Rome and by an ecumenical pleasure in a virile leader who had lived at the heart of the Holocaust. So his firmness was forgiven and

his friendliness applauded, and the later disclosure that the Vicar of Peter was flanked at the time by a parish priest and a prelate who would go on, each in his own way, to become, rightly or wrongly, scandalous in the sight of their own constituencies, could not lessen the bliss of having been there in the autumn of '79.

Today the immense cross which commemorates the feeding of the multitudes on that occasion (a million or more, they say, myself among them with a girlfriend whose body became my only nationality in the stateless passage of the 1980s, at a crowd event which was somehow more than a mass and therefore less than one) is the hospitable venue for homosexual meetings by night; and it seems right that those who have been excluded since antiquity should repossess the sign of suffering and of crucifixion as their mild pavilion, just as the travellers, up the road from me, winter in the debris of a small medieval church, where the vast preventative stones that block a caravan's access are as large as any boulder that sealed the tomb of the dead Jesus.

A mystic said to me some years ago that the Catholic Irish had endured two haematomas in the last hundred and fifty years and that the blood-loss was such that it would require subtle transfusions to restore even a threshold well-being to a patient who was sick unto death. In the first instance, we had lost our language, he said, and so our stories were unintelligible to us. In the second, we had lost our faith, and had no table-manners accordingly for the right bread-breaking. This is a drastic shorthand for a complex narrative, but it may be true. I was raised in a Marian household in the Kennedy and Khruschev era when thermonuclear annihilation shadowed the banal dailiness of life. Many altars brightened the landings and the children's bedrooms. Our Lady cooled my forehead when I ran, hummed from the quiet pictures hung above us. Her litanies became our valentines, her Angelus our memorized murmur in classrooms, kitchens, double-decker buses. Her holidays and holy days sweetened the male march of the calendar. When I was very small, and before it became an embarrassment to their bourgeois prosperity, my parents said the Rosary in the evening. I loved the drowsy patter of the prayer, its fullness and lulling. (Something like static stayed on my lips afterwards, as if I'd kissed a face on the television set so that my mouth was ticklish and electric.) Then too the first breasts that I saw were the Virgin's soft swellings, the first pregnancy her strange gestation of Jesus, and the first delivery the breeze-block and the live-stock in Bethlehem. All in all, the Marian model was a strangely chivalric tutorial for boys, while for girls the

lesson of its chasteness lay in the liberality with which it eroticized the rest of creation.

But that is not the point. The point is that nothing of this survives except as kitsch twenty years later. It does not mean a thing to my two daughters, each of whom knows the Scriptures far better than I did at their age and each of whom inhabits a benign and responsible schooling, remote from the moral arithmetic of my childhood, that may eventually prevail over our deep and abiding desire to be unhappy. In the span of a single generation, twenty years or so, this Marian ecosystem, something tender and coherent and enduring, has been trashed. Simultaneously, however, authentic Christian mystery has resumed a place formerly taken by discount mystification, so the probability calculus of 'if and might', of loss and gain, is hard to determine.

An example. Forty years ago an elderly parish priest, born, I should think, in the years of the Franco-Prussian war and the Paris Commune, kneeled on gravel before a friend of mine who had just made his first Holy Communion, and asked for his blessing. He took off his biretta, and the child, who had probably heard by then of Korea and of Radio Luxembourg, placed his open hand on the bald spot like a scull cap and blessed him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Even if we enjoy the image and are touched by it, it's unlikely to recur in what's left of my lifetime, because its theology is tainted by Jansenist assumptions. An old man has been in this world for an age: therefore the dirt of the earth adheres to him. An infant is new and his novelty protects him from defilement. Consumption of the host perfects his purity. He is therefore closer to God than those who have lived the duration and endurance of nomadic life. Those of us who are rather inclined to credit the opposite and to honour instead the painstaking assumption of flesh over a long lifetime, in the candour of one's fragility and in the charity of one's imperfection, to accomplish eventually some humanity through much humility, are more moved perhaps by a contemporary scenario, no less sacramental though currently subversive, in which Christians of different vocabularies communicate at each other's tables, not because they can construe the Aristotelian semantics of their menus, nor because the real presence of the risen Christ is denied or disputed in the elements, but because that real presence, that shekinah, is blindingly apparent in the drab and baffled individuals who are God's dream of community in the kindly planet he intended.

In the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, when the celebration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution was drowned out by the rising waters of the rivers of Eastern Europe as they inundated the arid governments of the Soviet buffer states and refreshed their citizenry with an antiseptic cleanness, I was watching the bulletins on CNN and walking the sticky kitchen tiles in the small hours with a weeping baby pummelling my nipple. Something of the hilarity and exhilaration of the youngsters who were prising concrete slabs from the Berlin wall with improvised levers reminded me then of an event in my own life, of some coercive barrier broken down finally, of some obstruction freed. But it would be ages before I remembered, ages before I could draw it in a doodle on the side of a sheet as a mnemonic in the radio studio where I work. What the rapture of those Ossis and Wessis had evoked was the sight of altar rails splintering under workmen's mallets muffled by chamoix hoods amid whining machinery, drills and saws like the torturer's kit in a crucifixion; the unhappiness of scarved working-class women at the Stations, whispering to each other; the silent curate beside me, with his smell of tobacco and apple; my father explaining to me that I had seen something momentous I could tell my grandchildren about; and my suddenly high-stepping, shocked by myself, elatedly, over the parquet floor and the carpet strip where the communicants kneeled, on to the clear cold tiles of the echoing sanctuary.

'Come out of there,' said the curate. 'That's beyond the beyond.' And he was right in his own way. The sanitary cordon which maintained the chancel in its eternal quarantine had been discarded; and the very flock which had been kept safe for centuries by the rigorous separation of the holy and the whole, of the sacred and profane, of the six days and the seventh, were about to discover that they had also been protected all along from the radioactive realm of the tabernacle's challenge. How much of this I understood would unfold in the slow fullness of time. For the time being, it was sufficient to be startled by the sight of marble rails in the courtyards of bistros and the sides of hotel swimming pools. The poor had received their Lord with open mouths and sealed eyes at these little frothy barricades, in a hush of dead mink glaring from glass eyes and indelible sale-prices inked on the upturned soles of mass-produced shoes; and the displacement of these small screens, these diminutive iconostases, from a thousand churches round the country made them vulnerable and therefore valuable in a way they had never been before, just as their removal from the apse had somehow decanted that whole quantum of grace and invitation into the nave and the transepts. Even the benches at the back

of the church were holier now, and the revolving doors at the west porch too. Perhaps the car park and the bus-stop and the butcher's, even, were hectares of eternity, a Galilean colony in hiding.

The space traversed by Irish Catholic Christians in the forty years or so since good Pope John is not easily mapped. It is a metaphysical distance, involving detours and reversals which no empirical journey tolerates. But its thrust is plain enough: it is to situate the ethical, and not the cultic, at the centre of personal and communal life; to demand of prayer and praxis that they cohabit, that they enter into a love act; or, more sanguinely, it is to recognize and acknowledge the sacramental continuum in what was once called the secular world. Indeed, the real travail of this quest – understood both as travel and as work, both as worship and witness – is always and everywhere to assert inherent sacredness, not just as a random planetary visitation which makes one aspect of our existence momentarily luminous or numinous, but as the oxygenating life-breath of the dogged, embodying globe itself. It is to move from the ease of theism to the work of incarnation, from the *deus ex machina* to a God who fell in love with human nature and who found that there was nothing to break his fall except the body of Christ.

All of this sounds like the routine agitprop of a lackadaisical Christian who was born into the lugubrious deliberations of the Council of Trent (still sitting sombrely at the midpoint of the twentieth century) and who grew to a lucky adolescence in the glory days of the Second Vatican Council, trading in transit his terrorized mood in the unadjourned former state for the more benevolent table-fellowship of the latter journey. But there are many of me, though it must be said in the same breath that the literate church has turned its back on the numerate one, and rightly so. We have learned hard lessons. We have learned that simple faith is a disaster, that power and authority are polar opposites, that Christ and Caesar are incommensurable, that the desolations of faith are as crucial as its consolations, and that only the virtues which ruin us are real.

If much of this seems like bad news, that's because it is. The good news will always appear like bad tidings from the perspective of our plans for the weekend and of our primary need, our prehistoric impulse, to control circumstance. If, in spite of that, we are moved to seek an altered state and an alternative spirituality, it will be found in others and in otherness, in alterity itself; will be grounded, that is to say, in the dangerous solidarity to which we give the strange grammatical name of the first person plural; and will flourish in an I that is not dotted, in a person who has learned his identity is a mask, and in a self which is

seasonal, deciduous and not evergreen, God's shout at the solemn. It may even happen that in the far-off cultural crossroads of an island that has entertained every kind of deity since time began, from the unitary being of Plato's philosopher kings and earlier Olympian bratpack, to the eastern Christ's austerity and Islam's imageless clarity, those two Sicilian spouses Michele and his wife Filomena, bickering energetically as ever over their doomed idols, will eventually discover that it takes the death of a very different god to bear our human nature.

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