

J. F. POWERS

THE PRINCIPALITY OF POWERS

Who has not wondered how the priests depicted by Powers, with their relatively minor flaws, could have given way in so short a time to the scandal ridden clergy of the 1990s?

When *The Prince of Darkness*, J. F. Powers' first collection of short stories appeared, it was assumed that many of his characters were closely modeled on clerics of the Archdiocese of St. Paul. It was even whispered that he had a clerical informant without whom, it was apparently assumed, he could not have written so tellingly of priests and bishops and nuns and rectories and all the associated lore. Sometimes such a misconception is the sincerest form of praise.

Powers, a native of Illinois, has spent most of his life in Minnesota, at or in the vicinity of St. John's University, a Benedictine foundation. The chief thing about him as a writer is that he writes. He communicates with the wider public through his stories, and in no other way. His stories are Catholic to the core, with priests the preferred subject.

But fiction is more manners than substance and undeniably the midwestern priests that populate Powers' stories are no more. A great deal has happened to the Church since Powers began to write and, wisely I think, he has decided not to adjust his imaginative vision to the changing flux but to continue to find in the pre-conciliar priest his proper subject. In

his most recent book, the novel *Wheat That Springeth Green* (1988), Powers did attempt a story of the Church after Vatican II, but the strength of the novel derives from the same inspiration as his earlier fiction. Despite the dates, the priests are pre-Vatican II -- and I mean that as praise.

The midwestern rectory, the mildly abrasive relations between pastor and assistant, between the priest and his enigmatic bishop, the continuing threat of the housekeeper, the go-getter priest who wants to put his parish or Order on the map -- this is Powers' world. His genius is to tease the essence of human conflict out of quibbles over forks and typing tables and parish cats. His stories are delightful in many ways, but one of the ways could hardly have been foreseen by the author.

In *Dubliners*, James Joyce caught his characters at a moment meant to reveal the vacuousness of their lives. But is that why the John Ford movie based on "The Dead" attracts us? The Dublin Joyce fled has become an object of nostalgia. Powers sees men whose awesome priestly function has degenerated into routine, a job. Nowadays their temptations almost endear them to us rather than shock us. They are somewhere between the saccharine celluloid priests of "The Bells of St. Mary's" and the prairie priest in F. Scott Fitzgerald's dark story, "Absolution" with which he considered opening *The Great Gatsby* (which would have made clear that the hero was a Catholic).

Powers is chiefly a short story writer -- his two novels have the air

of collections -- and he is not prolific, having published only five volumes during a career now half a century old. The title story of his first collection *Prince of Darkness* introduced a priest who would be a recurrent character, Ernest Burner. (Sometimes seen through the eyes of the rectory cat.) His hobby of photography necessitates a dark room and that is the origin of his (old) nickname. Burner is still an assistant although all his classmates now have their own parishes. He golfs, he takes flying lessons, he orders a beer with his burger at a drive-in. His basic fault is portrayed as gluttony, but Evelyn Waugh was right to see that it is the capital sin of sloth that dogs the steps of Powers' priests.

Sloth is weariness with and distaste for the sacred. The priest who does not pursue sanctity will lead an empty and seemingly trivial life, or so the saints assure us. Reading his office, administering the sacraments, saying Mass, can become mere functions he performs. His plight will be manifested in idiosyncrasy, pettiness, the need for distraction. What the present day reader may find hard to find in these stories is a sense of evil. Imperfection, venial sin, yes, but mortal sin? The only instance of the latter is the drunkenness of Father Desmond, but he is overwhelmed by a sense of his unworthiness to be a priest. Most Catholics nowadays would give a lot to have the rectories of the nation populated with Powers's priests.

Nonetheless Powers may provide a clue to what has gone wrong with the American priesthood. That comfortable life -- mindful of privilege

and perks (the clergy pass on the railroad, for example), used to deference from the laity -- while hardly riddled with vice, can be seen as the counterpart of the life led by Graham Greene's Mexican priest before the persecution began. Some Mexican priests apostacized, many were martyred, Greene's priest is being pursued -- by the faithful who need him as much as by the *jefe* who would kill him -- and he ruefully contrasts his fugitive life with the pleasant one he led before the revolution.

Who has not wondered how the priests depicted by Powers, with their relatively minor flaws, could have given way in so short a time to the scandal ridden clergy of the 1990s? The hero of Powers' first novel *Morte D'Urban* (winner of the National Book Award when that was still a real distinction) comes all right in the end, but in a world of pederasts, dissidents and malcontents he looks pretty good to us even before he is beamed by the golf ball that wakes him up. What explanation of this change can Powers provide?

Fairly or not, the image of the Catholic priest in the United States today is of a man unsure of his role, fearful to preach Church doctrine on sexual matters, allegedly chafing under the burden of celibacy and in a few tragic cases engaged in seriously sinful behavior. If 1/12 is the amount of treachery we should be prepared to expect from our spiritual leaders, we are surely still far shy of that. The priests of J. F. Powers have their defects but the reader is struck by the clarity they have as to what they are and

what they ought to be. Their problem is one of performance, not theology.

By contrast, the young men coming into the priesthood today have not received the kind of training that once was the rule. Rigorous seminary discipline did not guarantee sanctity of course, but its absence has results that are all too predictable. Not even Powers could have imagined a clergy talking the lingo of pop psychology and bishops speaking of pederasts as in need of counseling.

How did we get from there to here? Sloth is one of the capital sins.

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

“Phil was weak. Monsignor Renton was strong, and Father Urban, though strong, had no desire to come between old friends. Hence his sometimes halting speech, his turning of the other cheek. ‘*Your ass is out, Father*’ – ‘*And yet, Monsignor.*’”

Will Monsignor Renton build the larger church his growing parish needs or stick with the old one because of its sentimental meaning for him? Father Urban is the protagonist of *Morte D’Urban*, J. F. Powers 1963 novel, winner of the National Book Award. It marked the apex of a writing career that found its inspiration in the Catholic clergy of the Midwest. He published a another collection of short stories, *Look How the Fish Live* (1975) and a novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green* (1988) but Vatican II killed off his subject.. He died last year in elective obscurity, at home on the

campus of a Benedictine monastery in Minnesota. Now, the *New York Review of Books* announces that his five books will be reprinted.

A native of Illinois, who lived most of his life in or near St. Cloud, Minnesota – with extended stays in Ireland – Powers was a layman who found his subject in the “submerged population,” (as Frank O’Connor put it), of the pre-conciliar Catholic clergy of the Midwest. In an era when stories about priests in Catholic magazines were piously saccharine, Powers published his wonderfully funny and realistic stories in *The New Yorker*. He was never ignored, always admired, but ever aloof from the literary scene. No one could have imagined him schmoozing editors or other writers at a Manhattan cocktail party. Some years ago, given an award by the Wethersfield Institute, he was cajoled into leaving his Minnesota redoubt, no easy matter, but once in New York he welcomed the opportunity to visit a few jazz clubs. (Jazz musicians afforded him a rare alternative subject to priests). One night, looking up Fifth Avenue toward the Park, he wondered what it cost to live in one of those posh apartments, as his friend Garrison Keillor did at the time. (Jon Hassler, another Minnesota author, was also a friend and Powers’ wife Betty Wahl was a writer too.) My best guess was, “Plenty.” He thought for a moment. “Think of how much you’d have to write to afford that.”

For a writer who lived by his pen but was not prolific, rural Minnesota was a wiser place to settle. And then his basic subject, the

clergy of the Midwest, was there. He published only two novels and three collections of short stories. His second novel was published in 1988, a quarter century after his first, and he said ruefully that his editor had not been alive when he published the first. Both novels seem to be collections of short stories, the genre in which Powers excelled.

Although Powers wrote mainly of the diocesan clergy, he founded two fictional orders, the Clementines and the Dolomites. In either case, there is an ironic contrast between the priest as *alter Christus* and as a man trying to make his way in an organization described as second only to Standard Oil in its efficiency. Powers' cites this contrast with tongue in cheek. Bishops act with whimsical power. Father Burner, of "The Prince of Darkness," a perennial assistant, longs for a parish of his own, has a crucial interview with his bishop and is given his new assignment in a sealed envelope which he is told not to open until after Mass the next morning. In his car he tears it open. "You will report on August 8 to the Reverend Michael Furlong, to begin your duties that day as his assistant. I trust that in your new appointment you will find not peace but a sword."

Powers' bishops, pastors and superiors are all like Father Burner's ordinary. Their underlings measure out their lives with coffee spoons. The dreaded nightly card game with a domineering housekeeper, clerical passes on trains, petty struggles. One pastor won't give his assistant a key to the rectory, another inspects his car after each use by his assistant. Unlike

Bernanos' priests, those in Powers stories do not seem to be in tortured quest of sanctity. They want the little perks of their world. The best analogy to them, perhaps, is found in Trollope's *Barsetshire*. Like Trollope, Powers never condescends to his characters. It has been said that J. D. Salinger loved his characters more than God does. Powers loved his almost as much as God does, because he had no illusions about them.

Someone reading Powers today might think that these are pre-Vatican II horror stories, a portrait of an authoritative Church from which priests, and laity, have been liberated. This would be a fundamental misreading. It is true that Powers lost his subject because of the changes that followed the Council, but it is safe to guess that he would have found today's priests an even richer source of comedy. His second novel fails because it tries to place priests of the Forties and Fifties in a post-conciliar world. He never got the hang of the last quarter of the 20th century. But he is unsurpassed on the pre-conciliar clergy.

Priests fascinate lay people just because there is a sacramental significance to them. Their office requires a deeper living of the Christian life and yet they are vessels of clay. For the believer they can provide a privileged instance of the way the world encroaches on the soul. By taking trivial events, Powers is able to underscore that most lives, including priestly lives, are caught up in quotidian, petty events, yet this is the arena in which one will save or lose his soul. That is the subtext of every Powers'

story. He is a Catholic writer in the way Dante was. The stakes are eternal, but they are decided in the moment, by seemingly disproportional acts. Paolo and Francesca are damned by an adulterous kiss. Powers' priests can go to hell for picking on an assistant. That is why they retain their interest even in a time when the devil and hell and the capital sins are seldom mentioned.