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Eamon Maher on Jean Sulivan

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175 YEARS – 50 GREAT CATHOLICS
Eamon Maher on Jean Sulivan

The priest-novelist Jean Sulivan may not be as well known as François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, but he deserves a place among the great French Catholic writers of the twentieth century.

Born into a Breton farming family in 1913, he lost his father in the trenches of the First World War and then had to endure the remarriage of his pious mother, to whom he was extremely devoted. It may have been the strong, simple faith of his mother that prompted Sulivan’s vocation to the priesthood: he was ordained in 1938.

While working in Rennes, he became very involved in cultural activities, but would not publish the first of his 13 novels, Le Voyage Intérieur, until 1958, when he was 45 years old. Sulivan was highly critical of the Church’s preoccupation with power and prestige and its narrow, legalistic interpretation of the Gospel, which he thought was a betrayal of Christ’s call for interior rebirth and freedom.

In his spiritual journal, Morning Light, he reflects: “I see the Church detaching its members from structures of profit, conventional security, and mythologies in order to make them spiritual nomads, capable of commitment without illusion, always ready to absent themselves in order to go somewhere else, straining for the impossible and necessary.”

His characters, many of whom are based on people he knew in real life, tend to live on the margins of society – tramps, drug addicts, rebel priests, misfits of all types – and seem to possess more satisfactory answers to the questions that life throws at them than most of those living at the centre.

I translated Sulivan’s moving memoir describing the death of his mother, Anticipate Every Goodbye, into English; it has helped me at times of personal bereavement. “Life … is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way.”

Killed in a freak hit-and-run accident in February 1980, Sulivan’s prophetic voice continues to resonate in his writings.

Eamon Maher is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies, based in Dublin.

PUZZLES

PRIZE CROSSWORD
No. 489 | Alanus

Across
7 French town with the French patron saint of widows (5)
8 & 19 Down: He cannot handle pressure when system leads to destruction (7,5)
10 Convert poet finds a direction after financial collapse (7)
11 More deadpan wit when reduced rainfall (5)
12 Alert inner circle to where in NW FSSP church now established (10)
13 Set off before I halt alternative Philistine champion (7)
14 The play’s the thing for this small community (6)
15 He forgets end of prayer change and is back with current option (8)
16 Christian body embracing direction for particular thing (5)
17 International body with water supply for sick (6)
18 Canonised Queen with direction in part of boat (5)
19 See 8 Across
20 In unbalanced state discover place of Welsh Marian shrine (4)
21 Dictionary link with earliest Tyburn martyrs (7)
22 Drill; 22 Adam
23 Across: Respond to phone message from God? (6,3,4)
24 Intrinsically rich contribution to song (5)

Down
1 Solemn commitment delivered in Credo at High Mass (4)
2 Gathering opening following Greek letter painting (5)
3 Solenm commitment delivered in Credo at High Mass (4)
4 & 23 Across: Respond to phone message from God? (6,3,4)
5 He forgets end of prayer change and is back with current option (8)
6 He cannot handle pressure when system leads to destruction (7,5)
7 Legion; 8 York; 12 Birthday; 15 Of Dover; 16 Barber; 17 Priest; 18 Chad; 19 Auditory; 21 Adah; 23 Brindle; 24 David; 25 Riley; 1 Cachot; 5 Pearl; 8 Ypres; 9 Earring; 10 Rape; 11 Peterloo; 13 Basil; 14 Bulow; 15 Earring; 10 Rape; 11 Peterloo; 13 Basil; 14 Bulow; 19 Auditory; 23 Adah; 23 Brindle; 24 David; 25 Riley; 26 Timbre
6 Set off before I halt alternative Philistine champion (7)

9 Pipes heard after year in transgression before cross (6)
13 He forgets end of prayer change and is back with current option (8)
14 The play’s the thing for this small community (6)
15 Be in charge of diocese? (7)
16 Experiences timely season but afterwards sure to change (10)
19 Please send your answers to:

Crossword Competition 5 December
The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY.
Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. A bottle of wine courtesy of J. Chandler & Co Ltd will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random on Friday 18 December.

Solution to the 14 November crossword No. 486
Across: 1 (Cachot; 5 Pearl); 8 (Ypres; 9 Earring; 10 Rape; 11 Peterloo; 13 Basil; 14 Bulow; 19 Auditory; 23 Adah; 23 Brindle; 24 David; 25 Riley; 26 Timbre. Down: 2 Agrippa; 3 Hess; 4 The Red; 5 Perpetua; 6 Ariel; 7 Legion; 8 York; 12 Birthday; 15 Of Dover; 16 Barber; 17 Priest; 18 Chad; 20 Drift; 22 Adam.

Winner: Bill White, of Well Hall, south-east London.

Solution to the 14 November puzzle

Each 3 x 3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

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