

READING A POSTMODERN THEODICY IN THE *DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST*

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The opening image of *Diary of a Country Priest* (Bresson, 1951) is of the eponymous diary. The book opens and we see a black ink blot that resembles a Jackson Pollock painting. This sheet is moved to reveal the words of the diary. The abstract “painting” turns out to be a blot sheet inserted between wet pages to keep the ink from bleeding onto other pages. But the accumulated image created by the words of the diary is an image of chaos and disorder. We see and hear the Priest writing the film’s first lines: “I don’t think I’m doing anything wrong in writing down daily, with absolute frankness, the simplest and most insightful secrets of a life actually lacking any trace of mystery.” The Priest sees his life as insignificant, just another accumulation of events that, when seen over time, only amount to a disordered ink blot. This theme of disorder returns when the priest’s friend Torcy says the job of a priest is to create order: “Keep order all day long, knowing full well disorder will win out tomorrow, because in this sorry world, the night undoes the work of the day.”

The theme of struggling for Justice and order recurs throughout the film. One of the Priest’s first duties is the funeral of a townswoman. Her husband says it is “only just” that he be allowed to bury his wife for free even though everyone is required to pay the same funeral fee. The Doctor says “I’m not one to go around babbling about justice. I don’t expect it for myself. From whom should I ask it? I don’t believe in God.” After the Doctor commits suicide, the Priest wonders about the state of his soul, and Torcy replies “God is the only judge. Dr. Delbende was

a just man, and God is the judge of the just.” Chantal comes to him in anger about her father’s adulterous affair with her Governess and says “You know quite well all I ask is justice.” The Countess thinks God’s allowing her son to die was “unjust”.

But the Priest sees himself as a bad priest, unable to create the meaningful order he is called to. In the next scene after Torcy tells the Priest to create order, the Priest says “the simplest tasks are by no means the easiest”. The Priest is constantly criticizing himself for not praying enough, but Torcy tells him “you have the spirit of prayer”. What could this mean?

The Priest’s defining characteristic seems to be the stomach illness that will develop into terminal cancer by the end of the film. The illness prevents him from eating anything but bread and wine, leaving him weak and making the townspeople think he is a drunk. The doctor tells him his stomach problem is the result of his alcoholic mother drinking too much while she was pregnant. Clearly the illness is a metaphor for original sin, passed down from parent to child. And the only solution to the suffering caused by sin is the bread and wine of the Eucharist. But this is something the world will not understand: they will only see the Church as a bunch of hypocritical sinners, rather than a group of sin-sick pilgrims in search of the only medicine that can help them.

Indeed, the film seems to see the priest’s suffering as a sign of his closeness to God. After he receives the anonymous letter telling him to resign from the parish, the Priest stays up all night trying unsuccessfully to pray. He finally concludes “God has left me. Of this I am sure.” And the next scene reports “an incredible improvement in my health”. But the very next scene is the Doctor’s suicide. In response the Priest says “I have never suffered so much and likely never will again, even when I die.” The Priest’s emotional distress is presumably because he himself had considered suicide and the Doctor had told him “You and Torcy and I are of the same race,

an odd race. . . . The race that holds on.” If the Doctor could not hold on, how could he? At the Doctor’s funeral, Torcy told him that the Doctor had “lost his faith, and couldn’t get over not believing”. It is this connection between himself and the Doctor that leads the Priest to suffer. But it is at this point the Priest says he realized he “had not lost my faith”. Apparently, the evidence of his faith and God’s presence is his suffering.

Later he has an epiphany when Torcy again discusses with him what it means to be a priest (or to have a “vocation”): “If you can’t pray, just repeat the words! Listen, I don’t think I’ve been wrong about you. Try to answer this. I’ve thought a lot about vocation. We’ve all received the calling, only not in the same way. And to simplify things, I try to put each of us in his place – in the Gospels. In short, I think – or I imagine – if our soul could drag this wretched body of ours back up that slope of 2,000 years, it would lead it straight to the very place where –” He breaks off because the Priest is crying. The Priest tells us “The truth is that I always return to the olive grove [i.e., to the Garden of Gethsemane where Christ suffered his most emotional anguish while waiting to be crucified.] It was a very familiar and natural movement for my soul. I’d never realized it until that moment. Suddenly Our Lord had shown me grace and revealed through my old master’s lips that nothing would tear me from my chosen place in eternity. I was a prisoner of the Holy Agony”.

Note that the film’s first shot of the Priest is of his wiping his face (a sign of his physical frailty) and film shot immediately cuts to a shot of the Priest looking through the bars of a metal fence as if he were in prison, thereby establishing the metaphor of his suffering as prison. But note also that the Priest sees “prisoner” here is a good thing, something which keeps him from leaving God. His suffering is the evidence of God’s presence, not God’s absence. His suffering is

a symbol of Christ's suffering: by living, whether he prays or not, he is "repeating the words" of the Gospel. His life of suffering is itself his prayer.

He comes close to this insight earlier in the film when he counsels the Countess to "resign" herself to life's suffering. The Countess is the first to bring up resignation. She says she is "resigned" to her husband's infidelities. The Priest tells her it is wrong to send Chantal away, but the Countess doesn't care about right and wrong: "God took my son from me. What more can he do to me? I no longer fear him." The Priest replies that God only took her son "for a time" but that her "the coldness of your heart may keep him from you forever." The Priest implies that the Countess loved her son too much and is allowing his death to come between her and God and hence will ultimately come between her and her son in the afterlife. She wonders how love can be bad, how it could ever separate anyone. Love "has its order, its law" that God himself is subject to since it is God's nature to love.

Next the Priest points out sin's ability to bring disorder into the world: "No one knows what can become of an evil thought in the long run. Our hidden faults poison the air others breathe. ... I believe if God gave us a clear idea of how closely we are bound to each other in good and evil, we truly could not live." She asks what is "this hidden sin?" and he replies "You must resign yourself. Open your heart", implying that her sin is the desire to create order and justice. Rather than getting angry about the evil and disorder in the world, she must resign herself to it. She says, recalling the Doctor's suicide, she is already resigned; otherwise she would have killed herself. He replies, "That's not the resignation I meant." What he wants is her to admit that she hates God for not bringing about what she sees as justice. As soon as she does this, he says "Now at last you are face-to-face. He and you. ... You must yield to him unconditionally. ... Say: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." She says can't say this, because it would be allowing

her son to be dead. But he replies, “The kingdom whose coming you have just wished for is yours and his”, recalling his earlier claim that “there isn’t one kingdom for the living and one for the dead. There is only the kingdom of God, and we are within it”.

Note that the Priest ends up doing exactly the opposite of what Torcy had originally said a priest’s job is: rather than bringing order into the Countess’s life, he gets her to give up the illusory desire for order. She says “an hour ago, my life seemed to me in order, each thing in its place. You have left nothing standing.” He replies “Give it to God just as it is.” When she objects that she is too proud, he says “Give him your pride along with everything else”, recalling his earlier claim that “to die is difficult, especially for the proud”. Eventually she is able to give up her hatred over her son, symbolized by throwing his picture into the fire. As she writes in her letter to the Priest, “I didn’t believe resignation was possible, and in fact it’s not resignation that has come over me. I’m not resigned – I’m happy. I desire nothing.” By giving up her desire for order in the world, she is able to find happiness, a kind of spiritual order within the external disorder. And this leads immediately to her death due to a heart problem, a metaphorical death to this world in order to achieve life in the next.

Later we find out that Chantal had spied on this conversation. But, while she had experienced the very same scene as the Priest, she had interpreted it very differently than the Priest did. When Torcy repeats Chantal’s claim that the Priest had “blackmailed” the Countess with eternal damnation, the Priest says “that’s your version of what happened. I could tell a different one.” Note that he had earlier told the Canon (the Count’s Uncle, also a priest) “I don’t see how there could be any report of such a conversation”, suggesting that the truth is ineffable and any account would only be an interpretation.

It is this idea of alternate narratives that is the key to the opening shot of the ink blot sheet. The Priest does indeed share the same motto as the doctor: “face up to it”. But where the Doctor faced up to the disorder of life and interpreted it as a reason to commit suicide, the Priest faced up to the disorder of life and interpreted it as “grace”, the chance to live in “the Holy Agony”. So the Priest does have “the spirit of prayer” but that is because by resigning himself to a life of suffering, he turns his life into a prayer: the re-incarnation Christ’s passion. This is what it truly means to be a priest: to mediate the suffering of Christ to the world and vice versa. The Priest is right that “our hidden faults poison the air others breathe”, but he is also right that “we are bound to each other” in both “good and evil”. Hence the hidden virtue of our suffering purifies the air others breathe.

But this “war” (as Torrey calls it at the Doctor’s funeral), is a mystical and hidden war that requires proper interpretation to be revealed. The last shot of the film is a shadow of a cross that is meant to recall the opening shot of the ink blot. When looking at the diary and its account of the events of the Priest’s life, we might see the very same events as the image of disorder or we might see them as a reflection of Christ’s Holy Agony. The difference is whether we can achieve resignation and the desire for God’s kingdom to come. The film’s last line ought to be our response to the evil, disorder, and suffering in the world: “What does it matter? All is grace”.