

# Book Reviews

## Life is not a Long Quiet River: A Memoir

Willy Slavin

Berlin Ltd, Edinburgh, 2019

ISBN: 9781780275789 (pbk) 224 pages

£12.99

This book has an interesting construction. If the reader is looking for something along the lines of *Seminary Boy* by John Cornwell, then this book will not fit the bill; rather it is a reflection on aspects of the author's life and priesthood.

When we think of a Roman Catholic priest, we still attach the attributes of Obedience, Poverty and Celibacy largely because RC priests do not live ostentatious lives, and remain unmarried. The matter of obedience is a moveable feast: there have always been 'radical' priests and 'conservative' priests: the Church needs people with the wisdom to accept and deal with each type of priest appropriately in love and support.

Fr Slavin examines his life in the context of these three qualities, starting with obedience, observance of which was more strictly expected and enforced than in recent years. He deals with his early education at Blairs College, Aberdeen, and his years at the Scots College in Rome. His time as a seminarian there coincided with Vatican II, a time when the church sought how best to fulfil her role.

The picture he paints is a classic description of training at that time – it was deficient in so many respects. He comments:

*The priority seemed to be conformity to form rather than individual development. Priests didn't have to be deeply religious, what was expected was a good grasp of ritual and willingness to follow the minutiae of regulations. We should have been learning the arts and sciences instead of learning by rote snippets of medieval philosophy in Latin.*

n the light of that we should not be surprised that he went on to study psychology, a substantial part of his ministry being spent in the sphere of social work – tough housing issues, prison and hospital chaplaincies, and the creation of the Scottish Drugs Forum. He also spent 5 years in Bangladesh.

As well as an account of his life and ministry there is substantial commentary on the workings and personalities of the Archdiocese of Glasgow, and its Archbishop, 'Tam' Winning. During a part of the relevant period, I was Director of Charity Taxation at KPMG, and was engaged to provide consultancy advice to the Archdiocese. I read this book with a 'second eye' on his observations on the policies of the Archdiocese at the time, and was delighted that, piecing together what Fr Slavin records and what I knew from my work, his accounts are fair and insightful.

Fr Slavin's ministry was a 'radical' ministry in many respects: the indications are that the man and the job were matched in a way that does not often happen in the Church: this is especially so when considered in the context of the required 'obedience'. Thus the first section of the book is strong with much insight into the times in which he served and the issues facing the church.

The next two sections, on Poverty and on Celibacy, offer the author's more individual take on issues that have always proved controversial. Whilst his views on these issues are clearly at odds with the values taught at his seminary, they are views which, nonetheless, continue to enliven relevant debates both inside and outside the Roman Catholic church.

The section on Poverty opens with an excellent summary of how Glasgow came to be synonymous with poverty, and observes that the 'rich' Church was substantially supported by the poorest. But his upbringing was not characterised by poverty; he lived in the household of a skilled working class father who kept an allotment, and his attendance at boarding school (Blairs) was not the secondary education of a typical working class boy. Poverty was in some sense a secondary matter only: he observes:

We students left Rome aware that there might be tensions around obedience. We were also aware of changing sexual mores. There was, however, still no teaching about poverty.

His role model for his priesthood was the founder of the Emmaus movement, and he used the poor as sermon illustrations when working in a middle class parish.

Similarly the section on Celibacy, whilst it clearly show the author's own take on this aspect of church teaching, raises questions which will continue to find both support and opposition in the wider Roman Catholic Church communities and structures.

It is sex that puts people off religion. It is the most personal part of life, a powerful impulse that is only managed by great effort. It is not an area where young people find it easier to brook interference from others.

The difficulties facing the Church are summed up in this section, but Fr Slavin is clear that celibacy for its own sake is sterile: it may be a choice based on practical considerations, but its 'merits' may be lost unless love is evident in deeds as well as words: men and women are all called to the same spirit of compassion.

If the first part of this book is the portrayal of a varied priestly life lived in the service of others, the second part examines with honesty and candour the stresses and compromises that such a life has meant for the author. Whilst the reader may not agree with all of the author's views, I shall still file it under 'a good read!'

**Allan Hargreaves**, whose work is centred around charity law and finance, has worked closely with UK religious orders and charities in an advisory as well as a professional capacity. He works closely with the Peru Mission (<http://www.theperumission.org.uk/>) which champions the lives of those living in urban poverty as well as rural jungle dwellers, indigenous people who live in communities along the Amazon's tributaries.

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### **The Way of St. Benedict**

Rowan Williams

London: Bloomsbury, 2020

ISBN: 978-1-4729-7307-8 (pbk), 147 pages

ISBN: 978-1-4729-7309-2 (e-pub)

£12.99

Thinkers capable of speaking fluently the languages of both Catholicism and modernity/post-modernity, not as antipodal forces but as intelligible discourses, are rare. Rowan Williams is such a thinker. In this collection of five short essays, Williams reflects on the relevance for our times of the