



RON BLAIR'S *THE CHRISTIAN BROTHERS*

by Sister Veronica Brady

The man who founded the Christian Brothers in Ireland in the nineteenth century was, as the play tells us, a wealthy Irishman.

One day he was looking out the window and he saw some kids, urchins they were, playing in the street. It struck him, really hit him, for the first time: these kids would never enjoy the advantages he'd had. He felt what can only be described as a sense of vocation. A calling. He turned to a friend ... and he said: 'I'm going to teach those kids and give them a chance. Bring them up in the knowledge and love of God.'

From Ireland, the community he founded spread throughout the world to the Americas, Asia and Australia, teaching boys, originally only those who were poor, but gradually enlarging the scope of the schools until the Christian Brothers gained a reputation as first-class educators, especially good at getting good examination results, giving their pupils the best possible opportunities, enabling them to go into the professions, public life or business properly equipped. In Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where Catholics were mostly poor, mostly Irish and often discriminated against, the Brothers gave thousands of boys a chance in life; a deep sense of the importance and dignity of being Catholic, members of a worldwide community of belief and practice; and just as good, if not better an education than anyone else in a society which often despised Catholics as poor, ignorant and uncultured.

The Christian Brothers, then, are men who belong to an organisation which grew out of a dream of the best kind, which grew out of real experience. Moreover, it was an experience based on love, on feeling for and identifying with the problems of the poor. For Edmund Rice, Christian belief had to do with, and ought, he hoped, to make a difference in, the real world. It was not a matter of passively enduring suffering and oppression in this world in the hope that this

endurance would be rewarded in the next. For him, being a Christian meant being involved with the needs of others and doing what he could to increase their freedom and dignity—in his case, by educating them, helping them to grow in the 'knowledge and love of God' and to realise that poverty, injustice, oppression and humiliation should not be accepted without protest but that everyone had the right to live with dignity and hope. Refusing to give moral approval to the way things were, his vision insisted that human beings were not pawns of history but could take charge of their own lives.

What, then, seems to have gone wrong with this vision in the play *The Christian Brothers*? Perhaps, more importantly, what also seems to have gone wrong in the 'real world', given that so many people, seeing the play, recognise the 'school they went to' and hail the 'realism' of the play? True, the operative word in both cases is *seems*. True, too, what appears to be 'real' on stage is not necessarily an exact copy of life. Nevertheless, the questions remain. To answer them or, better, to attempt an answer, it is necessary, first of all, to explore the play itself.

Its opening note is one of loss, of melancholy. The Christian Brother enters, his small Globite suitcase under his arm, chanting the opening lines of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale':

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.

His eyes are closed. Even if he 'enters wildly', flinging questions which interrupt the poem, jabs his finger at the class and, taking out his strap, advances to use it, the poem is still somehow his environment. He, too, is a lonely figure. 'It's amazing', he says, 'how few (of your friends) want to see you again after you join the Brothers'. Being a Brother, he explains, means giving all one's time to one's work, to teaching, preparing, marking essays, concerning oneself not only with the boys'

work but also with their souls, with their religious belief and practice. This is an urgent task since 'saving your immortal soul' is all that matters. So urgency marks everything he does—in contrast, he tells the class, with the teachers 'at the State schools' who, 'after the last bell ... go home to their wives and forget all about you'—and allows him to quote, if not with much feeling (the Brothers' teaching of literature is not well-known for its feeling) at least with sympathy:

Tis not through envy of thy happy lot
But being too happy in thine happiness
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beeches green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

He seems to have given up so much for so little:

Why do we become brothers in the first place?
We forgo marriage, children, plane travel, the
please or power and ambition, friends even ...
why do we do it? Sometimes I wonder myself.

Somehow the reason he gives, that he became a brother to 'save his immortal soul', does not seem sufficient. True, the vision underlying that is a traditional one, and from a noble tradition at that. When he tells his class that 'we have only one brief ... life' and that it is on that 'we're judged for all eternity', he quotes the great image of Venerable Bede, the Anglo-Saxon chronicler: 'life [is] like being at a feast in a noisy, warm and well-lit banqueting hall. Outside, darkness.' Nor is this vision as tragic as it sounds, since 'Christ revealed to us what is outside the hall'.

In theory, that is to say, his faith ought to give him confidence and serenity, a sense that the purpose of his life goes beyond this life. In fact, evidently, it does not. He is haunted by fear of 'losing his faith', of going to hell, troubled, it seems, psychologically, by feelings of his own inadequacy. 'I'm not important at all.' He is constantly comparing his own devotion to the selfish carelessness he attributes to teachers in State schools; demanding to be called 'sir' even by old boys after they have left school; and insisting on his rights by beating the class into submission. Above all, he is uneasy with his own body: full of sexual anxieties, convinced that even to think about sex is to condemn oneself to hell, to 'torture without any end whatsoever', but at the same time obsessed by it. The reflexive verb

he chooses as an example in the French lesson, for instance, is *deshabiller*, to undress. All of these anxieties and fears explode finally into a fury of rage which has him beat a boy unconscious—it may be he even kills him—just because he has compared him with Brother Kiernan who evidently gives more time to teaching and less time to pious ramblings. Moreover, the reason he gives is care for the boy's 'immortal soul'.

There is no doubt that such characters exist, though less often today, one would think. But what they represent is a distortion of the religion in general and Catholics in particular, not its true face. True, this distortion often seems fairly widespread—as G.K. Chesterton remarked, 'it is not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, but found difficult and not tried'; and there is a sense in which the sharp, clear divisions between right and wrong, the all-embracing dogmatic system the Brother embraces, is less difficult to live by than the Christianity which depends upon a risky commitment to 'realities at present unseen' which are to be found not in some shadowy 'after life' but here and now in the claims of other human beings. What the Brother represents, in fact, is what Marx criticises as a form of 'alienation': the belief that this world matters little in comparison with the next and that therefore suffering and injustice in this world are to be endured without complaint, since the suffering will be rewarded with happiness in heaven. So for the Brother other lessons matter very little in comparison with religious lessons, prayers before class, the hymns he occasionally breaks into and the pious digressions which continually interrupt his teaching of so-called 'secular' subjects. Hence his rage when Brother Kiernan is mentioned. His insistence on teaching efficiency threatens not only his sense of priorities but also his whole system. 'He thinks', the Brother shouts, 'that mathematics is more important than praising the holy name of God!'. Thus he 'would be better off in a State school'.

As the Brother himself observes, there is something obsessive about all this. It has been said of Catholics of this kind that if they 'had nine lives, they'd spend each one thinking about the next'. The Brother's reflection is the comic one that we 'don't have nine lives! We have only one very brief one'. Religion of this kind tends to be

ill-at-ease in the actual world and thus to become defensive. Catholicism becomes a kind of fortress, besieged by a hostile world which constantly seeks to undermine it. Thus there is 'Catholic history' which tells the 'true story' of events like the Reformation, for example, or the part played by the Papal States in the movement for the unification of Italy. But society at large will not listen to it. Indeed, the Brother warns his pupils, it will penalise them if they so much as identify themselves as Catholics, by writing at the head of the page AMDG (*ad majorem dei gloriam*), all for the greater glory of God (the motto St Ignatius Loyola gave to the Jesuits and which the Christian Brothers also adopted). Similarly, Catholics of this kind have their own way of behaving, particularly as far as sex is concerned. Contraception of any kind is forbidden: if the Brother wants to know if any old boy has 'kept the faith', 'I just ask how many children he's got. That's usually the give-away. If he's got five or six, you can be pretty certain.'

All this, as we have said, is relatively simple, certainly clear-cut and demands little thought. So it is ironic that as he is frantically beating the boy who has dared to compare him to Brother Kiernan, the Brother also belts out the words of the catechism: 'I know I have a soul ... because I am alive ... and because I can think ... reason and choose freely'. For him the sign of 'being a good Catholic' is keeping all these rules and above all, going to Mass every Sunday; 'Keep the Mass, boys, and you'll keep your faith'. So, too, the way to deal with temptation, that is, with the sexual feelings, is more or less mechanical: keeping busy, playing sport—'when temptations arise, do something else. Go and play handball. Handball's great virtue is that it demands such energy that it outpaces the devil.' As he tells the boys, 'chastity's relatively easy if you're busy'. It also involves constant examination of conscience, constant vigilance:

Ask yourself: Have I had impure thoughts?
Have I engaged in impure talk, jokes I'd be
ashamed to tell my mother? Have I been
touching myself? Hands off, lads, hands off.

But all this involves constant tension and struggle. Even if the religious see themselves as somehow set apart, called to 'something higher', 'don't think, that the Brothers don't feel these temptations of the flesh', the Brother tells the

boys. As he says elsewhere, 'the flesh is weak. We're only human'. In other words, tension is of the very nature of his existence. Moreover, weakness, failure to resist temptation, brings retribution—'the most punishments in hell are reserved for the fallen religious'. The discipline he boasts of is unforgiving. The Church for him is a military organisation which demands absolute obedience. Any questioning, any backsliding, is punishable. Thus, although he tells his class that what he calls 'defiance'—the choice of word is significant, what he means really is 'independence of thought'—is 'not a bad thing for a young bloke to have', they must never 'defy' the Church—'Remember Martin Luther ... The Church is a bad enemy to have, boys'.

Are we then to say that the play is about a neurotic? For a number of reasons, I do not think so. The first reason is what we might call a technical one. In fact, as we have already noted, we are not talking about a real human being but a character in a play. What the Brother represents, that is to say, is hypothetical. He exists only on stage. What happens there is only imaginary. There will be no trial for assault after the end of the play. True, it could be said that the possibility he represents, that is, the possible way of living, is a neurotic one. But that is to apply the test of uncommon sense, with the spectacle of what happens when people and their actions become larger than life. To call this character neurotic in this context is to make the norm the kind of behaviour which is socially acceptable. But the world the play creates has to do more with what people believe or do not believe and that belief provides, if not the norm—otherwise we would not find the Brother tragi-comic, as I think we do—at least it enables us to understand and thus to sympathise with the character.

The second reason follows from this. As we come to sympathise with the Brother, he ceases to be a caricature and becomes poignantly human. His loneliness, his occasional longings for the wife and family he might have had, and his permanent longing for love; his fear of somehow ceasing to believe in the faith on which he has based his life; all these call for our compassion. Underneath the bluster and dogmatism, we occasionally glimpse a kind human being, one who feels for the human causes of the French Revolution, for the 'sheer

hunger', for instance, reflecting that 'a hungry man is a desperate one'. Then he becomes a real human being aware that to be human is to be vulnerable but also to rebel against injustice and work for a better world. He also grieves for the boys he knew and taught who were killed in the War. For him, it is not a matter of the glory of names on the honour roll, but of the human waste, the personal loss, especially in his memory of 'the best schoolboy five-eight I have ever seen', a 'wild boy', too, but 'a terrific bloke'.

According to a properly 'Christian' theology it is at this point that his attitudes appear as really Christian; that is, inspired by a love and sympathy with other human beings. Even more important in this respect is the longing for love and tenderness evident in his feeling for Mary, the mother of Jesus, the 'Blessed Virgin Mary' he believes he has seen in a vision. Whether he really has seen her or whether it was his imagination is not the point. As we argued earlier, what happens on stage is entirely imaginary so that, to paraphrase Doctor Johnson's defence of Shakespeare against those eighteenth-century critics who accused him of breaking the unity of place, once we grant that what is happening on stage is real, then there should be no difficulty in granting reality to everything that happens there. The dramatic importance here is the tenderness of the moment. Whether or not it is an illusion or, indeed, even a neurotic illusion, the Brother's vocation depends on this moment of tenderness.

It would be very easy to sentimentalise this, so the playwright undercuts it with the comic reference to the miracle of Pentecost described in the Acts of the Apostles—in which the Spirit of God, descending on the apostles, enabled people of many different languages to understand the sermon Peter preached on that occasion, each understanding it in his or her own language.

My parents were entertaining an Armenian and a Chinaman. 'I have just seen the Blessed Virgin Mary', I said, and both my parents, the Armenian and the Chinaman each understood me in their own language (p. 31)

Nevertheless the moment of insight itself is moving and vivid.

She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. All around her body was this light emanating out of her in a slow steady stream, giving off a sort of hum, like high tension

cables. She was wearing a mantle of blue light and she smiled at me and nodded. (p. 39)

Imagery, of course, owes a great deal to popular piety, to the statues and 'holy pictures' with which he would have been familiar. But the feeling is personal and he links these images to personal experience, to the hum of high tension cables. More importantly, perhaps, this feeling remains at the centre of his life in the conviction 'of the personal interest the Blessed Virgin Mary has in each and every one of us'. He may be tormented by the feeling that body and mind are not one whole but in a state of tension, if not war, with one another. But in this vision there is a brief moment of peace and harmony.

So, too, with the sense he has that his life, with all its problems, somehow makes sense when it is set in the context of the life of Christ. 'If I'm having a hard time accepting decisions, I think of Our Blessed Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane.' This, of course, is the point of the gospel in which Jesus himself seemed to be overwhelmed.

There, on his knees, he saw everything that was going to happen to him in the coming days: the mockery, the floggings, the crowning with thorns, that terrible journey with the cross and finally, most terrible of all, that cruellest of deaths where he alternated between gasping for breath or slumped as the nails tore through his flesh. (p. 28)

It is fashionable to see this also as remote, a sadistic preoccupation with suffering evident also, for example, in the Brother's fascination with martyrdom, with Oliver Plunkett, bishop and martyr, for instance. But it could be seen differently. It could be said that the apparent pointlessness of his life is given point, meaning and dignity by the story of Christ whose life, in his view, is the paradigm of all human lives. For most people in our culture, 'reality' is history and history is to be understood as, in essence, the result of human choices and desires. As the Marxist thinker Georg Lukacs put it:

We have made our own history and if we are able to regard the whole of reality as history (i.e. as our history, for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which 'reality' can be regarded as our action. (Andrew Feenberg and George Lukacs, *Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 117.)

But for Christians generally, not just Christian Brothers, this is not the case. There is a reality beyond what we can see, touch, taste, hear and eat, a 'reality at present unseen', as the Letter to the Hebrews describes it at the beginning of Chapter II, which nevertheless shows itself to us in the person of Jesus, the poor man from Nazareth who was crucified because of the challenge he offered not only to the rich and powerful, but also to the religious authorities of history. Moreover, Christians believe that this man was the manifestation of the invisible God, who is totally other, incomprehensible and inscrutable, on whose existence believers like the Christian Brothers have gambled their whole existence.

This view may not be very comprehensible to most people today whose thinking is determinedly individualistic and secular, believing only in the purpose and validity of what is here and now and accessible to the evidence of the senses. But most people throughout the history of the world have lived in terms of their myths, see their individual life as part of a larger pattern which provides its meaning and purpose. Just as a traditional Aboriginal hunter or an Aboriginal food gatherer would see his hunting or her food gathering in the light of the Dreaming story attached to it, seeing him or herself to be repeating the action of their heroic ancestors, so the Brother relates his life to that of Jesus, his 'Dreaming hero'.

This does not necessarily help him to adjust more easily to the world in which he lives, but it does help him better to endure the pain and make sense of his existence. Good work is something which pleases God, just as bad work is insulting to him. At the end of the play, as it gradually dawns on him that something is seriously wrong and that the boy is not going to get up, he is able on the one hand to identify with the martyr Oliver Plunkett—he, too, may have to endure a trial at the hands of the law—and on the other to find the strength in prayer, in the ancient traditional series of petitions to Mary, the Litany of Loreto. It may very well be, therefore, that he is better able to cope than most of us who lack his sense of a larger order of things. This sense also makes him, to some extent at least, critical of the way things are. He has evidently some critical thoughts about war, for example, though

his respect for obedience would seem to prevent him ever becoming involved in anything like the anti-war movement—at least, not unless it should suddenly become Church policy.

The Christian Brothers, then, is more complex than it seems at first. When we think more carefully about it, we are less able to sit at a distance and be amused by the strange antics of the Christian Brother. The form, too, helps this involvement. It may be a one-man play, there may be little in the way of sets and props, but the dramatist's imagination, expressed, of course, by the actor's power to compel us to believe in it, peoples the stage with angels and devils, as well as with the unseen class and all the others to whom the Brother refers, setting them all against a backdrop not just of daily reality but also of heaven and hell. In this sense, the Brother is perhaps not as lonely as he seems and sometimes feels; he belongs to a community which stretches over time and space.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is subversive. It is that it may be people like most of us, citizens of the secular society, whose sense of reality and of community is lacking. The truth of existence may be, as the psychologist Adler argues, that what we find when we are born into this world is not just our individual selves but an involvement in the long history of all the commitments which have been made by our forebears. Community is not a matter of belonging to a mere private circle, but a feeling with the whole human enterprise, *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is over time. It means, to quote Adler, 'striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting'. It therefore does not involve only our present day community or society. Nor does it just have to do with political or even religious forms. Rather, it is a goal which lies ahead, the ideal community of all human beings across time and space. It is something, that is, to hope for and work towards.

In the long run, *The Christian Brothers* belongs here. That is not to deny that it offers an amusing and sometimes pathetic experience. Indeed, the amusement and the pathos grow when we set it in this context. But it is not a play that anyone can afford to patronise. The last laugh may well be on the audience.