

To be a good priest, accept the primacy of God's will

Henry Morton Robinson's 1950 novel, *The Cardinal*, has a close relationship with St. John's, as the famously popular film version was made here at the church in 1963 by legendary director Otto Preminger. In the movie (available on DVD), there are great shots of the interior and exterior of St. John's, both upstairs and downstairs. Many of the schoolchildren in the film are still parishioners, and have fond memories of the Sisters of Mercy who chose them to appear in the movie.

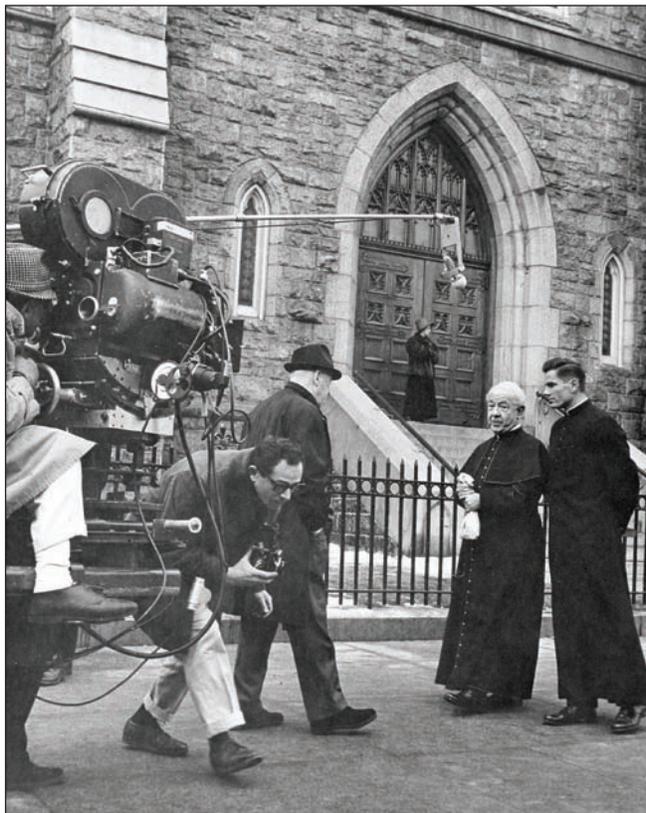
Alas, as so often happens, the movie is vastly different than the novel. Mr. Preminger took much advantage of his director's prerogative to adapt the text, inventing a variety of interesting scenes and subplots. The movie (which won the Golden Globe for Best Picture of 1963) is action-packed, and long, and covers the basic story of how a young ambitious priest fulfills his dreams and, eventually, becomes a Prince of the Church.

Mr. Robinson, on the other hand, is much more interested and thoughtful about the priesthood and the Church in his novel. This is the story of Fr. Stephen Fermoye, an energetic and zealous young man who wants to be a good priest. He succeeds, superbly, and becomes, as the title suggests, a cardinal. The latter part of the book is about him as a bishop, but that merely mirrors the man who, because he had become an excellent priest, showed those qualities in his work as a very good bishop.

In his foreword, Mr. Robinson reveals that the novel is not entirely fictional:

"I cannot pretend that (Fr.) Stephen Fermoye is wholly a product of my imagination. It would be truer to say that he is a composite of all the priests I have ever known – and particularly those priests who left mysterious imprints of their sacred office on my youth."

To underscore this, he quotes two texts:



course of seminary studies in the Eternal City. He is to take up his first assignment in a large downtown parish – in the movie, St. John's is the stand-in.

On his return to America, this young priest slowly discovers the meaning of the priesthood he has signed up for, as his faith and ministry encounter the daily problems in the lives of



FILMING OF "THE CARDINAL" OUTSIDE ST. JOHN'S CHURCH IN 1963, WITH CECIL KELLAWAY (MSGR. MONAGHAN) AND TOM TRYON (FR. STEPHEN FERMOYLE).

his desperately-poor parishioners; the tragedies and pressures in the lives of his aging parents and siblings; the superb example of humility in his pastor; and the challenge of his fractious, ill-tempered, pompous, and self-centered bishop, to whom he has promised obedience.

"And it is Your Will that is our peace" [Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III], which speaks to the heart of a priestly vocation. And, the first question of the *Baltimore Catechism*: *"Q. Why did God make you? A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next"* [Lesson First], which speaks to everyone's vocation and reason for existence. We exist and live for God.

The novel begins on the ocean liner *Vesuvio*, plying the frothy wave to Boston at the turn of the 20th century, bearing on board a recently-ordained young priest, Stephen Fermoye, returning home from his

While the film version moves from sensational situation to thrill-packed scene, the novel looks more intently at the man who is a priest, and two things that become clearer to him and to the readers, about life and the priesthood.

The first reality in all reality is the primacy of God and of God's will. Fr. Fermoye discovers this slowly as it relates to his priesthood. Here is a brilliant young scholar who finds himself assigned to parish work, and the strain is overwhelming, facing his family, himself, and the reality of God in real life. During a difficult time, Fr. Fermoye

retreats to a Benedictine monastery to reflect on his priesthood, and is assigned to help a feeble-minded monk in his kitchen work.

One day, as Fr. Fermoyle is cutting onions, the monk mumbles the priest's name. Asked why, the monk reveals that he is praying that God protect the priest's hands, so unaccustomed to physical labor. Fr. Fermoyle tells him to pray for his own hands, and the monk responds:

"If God wills that I cut myself, I shall accept it as a mark of His favor. But since I have placed the whole matter in His hands, it is not likely that any accident will befall."

"You merely surrendered yourself, trustingly, completely, to His will. Whatever happened thereafter was a mark of special favor. . . as simple as that. And as difficult."

All the priest's meditations about the ideal of obedience and humility, and his self-delusion that he was humble, are clarified in the words of this simple monk: *"Since I have placed the whole matter in His hands. . ."* And Robinson comments, *"Instead of trying to outrival his earthly father or dazzle the Heavenly One, you merely surrendered yourself, trustingly, completely, to His will. Whatever happened thereafter was a mark of special favor. . . as simple as that. And as difficult."*

Fr. Fermoyle discovers the one reason for a man being a priest: to remind people that God exists and is very real, lest we forget that fact, and create for ourselves a life that is merely our own myth, and that we are supreme in it. Whether in the life of an individual or of a business or of a country, it is *the* basic reality: the primacy of God in human affairs. And we must adapt accordingly, just as one adapts to another reality: gravity. For to deny the existence of either leads to tragedy.

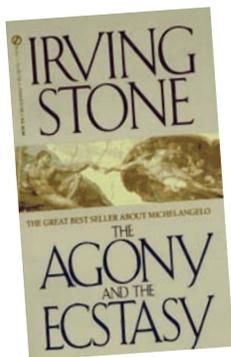
The second foundational reality, more slowly revealed to the young priest and

to the readers, is the effect of one's parents on an individual's personal and professional life. One of the first things Fr. Fermoyle discovers concerns his bishop: a crusty, gruff man who gets his way by bullying everyone in very loud tones – and who is just like Fr. Fermoyle's own father. Behind the authoritative exterior of both men, Stephen finds himself faced with the reality of the man he should be – and is, despite himself. His quiet, efficient, self-effacing and generous mother, who dotes on her priestly son, has instilled that sense of pity, charity, and piety so essential for the life of a man whose work is to show the compassionate Christ in the midst of

a harsh world.

Fr. Fermoyle's first years as a priest, while pious and filled with the faithful exercise of religious duties and obligations, are years of struggle to discover the man his parents formed, and to discover how that man must actually bend to the primacy of God and His will in daily life, in order to be an effective priest and lead others to eternity.

The Cardinal is a good novel. I think it could have ended quite well before Fr. Fermoyle becomes a bishop but, nevertheless, it is worth reading, for Mr. Robinson understands much about the priesthood.



Our next book, also made into a movie, is Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*; his 1961 novel of Michelangelo's painting of

the Sistine Chapel. It's another great read, and somewhat appropriate as we are presently focused on repainting a little church of our own into something extraordinary.

– Msgr. Stephen DiGiovanni, H.E.D.

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THE VIEW FROM THE BACK PEW

World Youth Day is not just for kids. In addition to homilies and talks directed at the 1.4 million young people who gathered in Madrid, Spain last month, Pope Benedict XVI imparted wisdom to adults who deal with children – notably, Catholic teachers.

On August 19, in an address to Catholic educators, the Holy Father condemned the all-too-common “utilitarian approach” to education which focuses on “pure technical ability” rather than the bigger picture. The result, he warned, *“can be tragic: from the abuses associated with a science which acknowledges no limits beyond itself, to the political totalitarianism which easily arises when one eliminates any higher reference than the mere calculus of power.”*

Teaching is not just about communicating content, the Pope continued, but about awakening in young people *“their innate thirst for truth and their yearning for transcendence.”* Educators must set a good example and show the way: *“We are a link in that chain of men and women committed to teaching the faith and making it credible to human reason. And we do this not simply by our teaching, but by the way we live our faith and embody it, just as the Word took flesh and dwelt among us.”*

Food for thought for all Catholic teachers as the new school year begins.