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Georges Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest* ('*Diary*' for the course of this discussion) offers an intimate look into the life and ministry of a fictional priest in France. Sixty-two years after its initial publication, Pope John Paul II produced an apostolic exhortation entitled *Pastores Dabo Vobis* ('*PDV*' in this discussion), *God Will Give You Shepherds*, offering reflections on the priesthood itself. This discussion will compare these two expressions of pastoral ministry and examine if *Diary*, while predating it, expresses an accurate application of *PDV*. Specifically, this discussion will look for applications of chapter III of the apostolic exhortation in Bernanos' text.

The introductory paragraphs of *PDV*'s third chapter repeatedly remind the reader that a priest is to be, in a unique way, configured to Christ. That is to say, he is, in a way proper to the priest and "even in the midst of human weakness to seek perfection" so that he may "become [a] living [instrument] of Christ the eternal priest." (*PDV* 20) It is reiterated in *PDV*'s quote of the rite of ordination: "Live the mystery that has been placed in your hands." (*PDV* 24) Bernanos' country priest exemplifies this in three ways: his long suffering, his forgiveness, and his willingness to sacrifice on behalf of his flock. Throughout the text, Bernanos' narrator undergoes physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. All of these, if internalized and accepted appropriately, exhibit an increasing configuration to Christ. To apply a comment from Archbishop Alfred Hughes from another situation, "Those mysteries [the Paschal Mystery] that we enter into in liturgy, [the priest experienced] in life."¹ The priest's experience of the Paschal Mystery was clearly expressed by the author in two instances. First, it is found in the narrator's own statement that he "remain[ed] the prisoner of His Agony in the Garden." (*Diary* 203) It is also present in the scene in which he first physically collapsed multiple times while trying to visit homes in his parish and finally had his face wiped by Seraphita, who serves as a type of

¹ Personal correspondence with Archbishop Alfred Hughes. This comment was not directly discussing this text, but the same seems applicable to this situation.

Veronica in Bernanos' narrative. (Diary 215-220) His forgiveness is well depicted in his next encounter with Seraphita after Catechism class (Diary 229-230) in which he, through his actions if not his words, offers her personal absolution; he seems to be, in this scene, echoing the words of Christ from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (John 23:34)² Finally, the country priest's configuration to Christ can be seen in his willingness to sacrifice for his flock. While, in a general sense, this is present throughout, there is one incident in the text that could be seen to go too far. It is oft recited that we must remember that the Church has a savior, Jesus Christ, and her ministers, priests, and members must remember that they are not saviors. This line seems to be dangerously pushed when the priest "impulsively" says "I'll answer for your soul with mine." (Diary 255) It is true that PDV refers to the priest as "both 'saved' and 'savior,'" (PDV 25) but it seems that expression finds its meaning in reflecting Christ; Bernanos's priest's impulsive statement seems to express himself as the savior, not himself as acting in Christ. It is also clear that such a willingness to lay down one's life is a part of the priesthood, but, at the same time, it would seem dangerous to put too much stock in one man's sacrifice as efficacious for another living person.

There is one more way that the priest in *Diary* reflects a radical configuration to Jesus Christ: as a good shepherd of his flock who "goes in search of the straying and scattered sheep." (PDV 22) This seems apparent in the attention that Bernanos' priest gives to the townspeople who could be considered either his enemies or beneath him or just would warrant, in a strictly practical outlook, giving up. The obvious example in this is Chantal, to whom the priest

² Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994). All scriptural references will come from this translation.

repeatedly asserts that he will continue to minister even though it is clear that she is the source of some of his difficulties in the town. (cf. Diary 206)

Another area set forth in *PDV* for which Bernanos' priest can be seen as an excellent example is his dedication to his parish. In paragraphs 31 and 32 *PDV* discusses the priest's "membership and dedication to a particular Church." (PDV 31) It is true that, strictly speaking, this reflects his relationship to the diocese and his bishop, but it seems that it can also be seen to reflect his relationship to the parish to which the bishop has assigned him to act as the bishop's emissary. The document notes that "incardination cannot be confined to a purely juridical bond," (PDV 31) in the same way, neither can a parish assignment. Bernanos' priest reflects both of these relationships as something more than a juridical obligation. His relationship to the presbyterate of his diocese is well shown in his ongoing relationship with the aging Torcy. His genuine care for his parish, beyond the requirements of a purely juridical responsibility, can be seen throughout the book, but, perhaps, it is best stated in the pain evident in his story at the outset as he observes the boredom of his parish, a boredom against which he feels powerless. (Diary 2)

There seem to be two closely related discrepancies between the priest in *Diary* and the expectations of *PDV*. This is the priest's relationship to prayer. *PDV* calls the priest to be, first and foremost, a man of prayer. While these words are not used per se, it is clearly implied. Pope John Paul II says, "The priestly vocation is essentially a call to...intimacy with God." (PDV 33) It seems impossible that intimacy with God can be achieved in any way except prayer, which is, at its root, about communion and intimacy with God. The document also asserts that there is an "intimate bond...between the priest's spiritual life and the exercise of his ministry." (PDV 24) *PDV* goes on to note that the priest is "chosen by Christ not as an 'object' but as a 'person'" and

later describes “the priest himself as a conscious, free and responsible person.” (PDV 25) From this, it seems clear that John Paul II was cautioning the tendency to separate one's life as a man in need of salvation from one's ministry as a priest. God does not call part of a person or an object, but instead calls the whole person to serve him in the ministerial priesthood. It seems, though, that these two aspects seem to be lacking in *Diary's* priest. The first, his prayer life, is consistently a challenge for him as he writes his diary. Torcy admonishes him on this matter in chapter six. The narrator cries out that he “can't pray” because his other struggles are so great, and Torcy orders him, “If you can't pray—at least *say* your prayers!” It is clear that, either partially or completely, the narrator's prayer life and commitment to prayer has grown weak or empty. Later, when the narrator is speaking with Mlle Louise, the indication of the second discrepancy is made manifest. She challenges something his comments about pride, and he replies: “Excuse me, if you wish to speak to the priest, he will ask you for a confession of your sins to have the right to give you absolution.” (Diary 224) Here, Bernanos' priest is suggesting that he is acting as himself rather than in his capacity as priest. This seems a dangerous separation; it must always be the case that the full person is brought to the priesthood, and, at the same time, there can be no time when the character of priest, once imposed, can be set aside, which is what his statement here seems to imply.

The priest-narrator in *Diary of a Country Priest* clearly fulfills some of the description offered by Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. However, he cannot be said to be an ideal priest as he is set forth in Bernanos' novel. While no priest is perfect, since, in bringing his full person to the priesthood, he also brings his own imperfections, it must be noted that there are corrections that must be applied to Bernanos' priest to more fully align him with the vision of priesthood set forth in Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation.