Editorial

Books That Stick to the Ribs

We do quite a bit of reading, but we hasten to add, lest anyone suppose that we boast, that it cannot be classed as systematic or scholarly. Long ago we were admonished by a professor, a wise and learned man, that we should not confine reading to our chosen field of study, but read widely so that we could keep our chosen field in touch with the rest of the world. He even said: “Read novels; the good ones will put you in touch with the way people feel their life experience and behave in the midst of it better than most systematic scientific studies.” While we have read our share of works on the scientific side of religion and the health sciences, we have found this advice from our teacher to be true in the long run. Novels, poetry, plays, brief but penetrating expressions of profound joy, sorrow, reverence, or insight do stick to the ribs. They live on in the memory as vast, systematic volumes of carefully researched and classified facts do not. We carry the former kind of reading with us as we go. We refer back to the latter as we must. The books that stick to the ribs are nourishing as a good meal must be. The volumes we return to for facts are essential, as raw materials are essential, but they have not been fashioned into anything that feeds the heart. As a priest once remarked, “Creeds are sung in the church; in the heart, never.”

Here are some books, old and new, read and reread, that have stuck to our ribs. But first a warning: if you are looking for the “dozen most important books of the last decade,” look elsewhere. These books have been selected from no best seller list or from any academic bibliography. It just happened that they stuck with us where we were at the time we read them. And that is another important point about reading. The one who writes and the one who reads must be ripe for each other at the time they meet. Otherwise, author and reader can pass each other casually like two strangers on a busy street with hardly more than a superficial glance as if to say, “That looks like an interesting person. I might enjoy meeting him or her some day, but it will never happen.”

The first such book is an obscure one: George Bernanos’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, published in the 1930s. It is a book we read fifty years ago and recently turned to again because it was mentioned in an essay by Mary Gordon
on books that had influenced her thought and writing. It is a small book, and it tells the story of a small life, a French country priest in a poor rural parish who stumbles on a sin of pride, lust, and indifference on the part of the richest and most powerful member of his church, a man who was the church's only benefactor and the source of its major support. Poor and sick himself, the priest by patience, by conscience, and by love brings about a human miracle of healing others, even as he fails himself and comes to his own death through poverty and sickness. What is so important about such a story? To us it seems to underline an often-forgotten truth: just as each of us knows in the depths of the self sins and weaknesses, failures and tragedies never expressed outwardly, so there may also be blessings and powers, healings and redemptions, that take place through us, almost in spite of us. If every hunger and striving after the ideal is tarnished by our weakness and selfishness, still it is possible that some of our failures may have good results beyond our capacity to understand. In the Bernanos book the priest's last words are, "Grace is everywhere."

One of the results of this kind of literary wandering is that one is led on by memory and association along new or perhaps long-forgotten paths which, when they are found again, strike one with fresh insight into their meaning and make one ask, "Why didn't I see that before?" Thus Bernanos's country priest led us back to a Victorian poet once popular, long neglected, and now usually dismissed as incurably and mistakenly optimistic about human nature, Robert Browning. In his poem describing the reflections in old age of Rabbi Ben Ezra, he wrote:

But all the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All men ignored in me.
This I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

It is at times comforting to realize, and helpful to others whom we try to help too, that in spite of failure, incompleteness, and desperation, people may do better than they think, even though at other times they may do worse. If the one is sometimes true, why not the other? Thus, following the cord of memory, we were led back to Wordsworth and "Tintern Abbey," where the poet speaks of: