

# The Priest in Sender's *Réquiem por un campesino español*

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Although Ramón Sender's short novel *Réquiem por un campesino español*<sup>1</sup> may be regarded as a general indictment of an anachronistic and unjust social system in rural northern Spain of the 1920s and 1930s, more salient and thematically constant is the suggestion of the deficiency of the Spanish Church, epitomized by the village priest, Mosén Millán. Sender himself has commented on the social aspect of the novel but without making any specific reference to the Church or the priest concerned: "Tiene una dimensión social muy acusada. . . . No pensé en otra dimensión, sino en la expresión literaria directa de un problema en torno a una aldea."<sup>2</sup> Eugenio de Nora, on the other hand, sees the human and psychological aspect of the novel as overshadowing the social theme,<sup>3</sup> and, like Nora, most critics of *Réquiem* . . . have focussed on the relationship between the priest and the peasant and the extent of the former's responsibility for the tragic events recounted in the narrative. Critics have, for the most part, been lenient or even generous toward Millán, recognizing his shortcomings and at times excusing them. Mair José Bernadete states: "Mosén Millán es un buen hombre: ha vivido de acuerdo con los cánones sacramentales de la Iglesia."<sup>4</sup> Josefa Rivas writes:

Esta novela está inspirada en un sentimiento profundo de imparcialidad hacia los errores cometidos por un sencillo cura de aldea . . .

. . . es importante notar la piedad con que Sendera trata a Mosén Millán. Lo trata con amor porque Sender ve en él una víctima de su categoría social.<sup>5</sup>

José Marra-López suggests that Millán's loyalties are misplaced and his judgement defective,<sup>6</sup> whilst Marcelino Peñuelas is more severe: "[Mosén Millán] Es . . . un símbolo del papel histórico de la iglesia, de su inercia ante urgentes problemas sociales . . . Es un hombre arrastrado, inmovilizado mejor dicho, por esa inercia . . . Aparece pasivo e inerte no sólo en su persona física sino también en los rasgos de su contorno sicológico y moral."<sup>7</sup> Julia Uceda is even more scathing: "En Mosén Millán había también debilidad y pereza. Y, sobre todo, ceguera . . . Todo lo que él pide es que le permitan administrar sus sacramentos, los de su Iglesia, y lo hace deshumanizada y profesionalmente."<sup>8</sup>

While the above comments indicate that there exist diverse attitudes toward Millán, it has not been suggested, even by Peñuelas or Uceda, that Sender's prime concern in the novel might be to expose and censure the priest and his Church. Yet, as the narrative progresses, the reader is made increasingly aware of his failings until, with the conclusion, there can be little doubt of the author's intention. The purpose of this study is to examine Sender's treatment of Mosén Millán and in so doing to demonstrate the author's principal objective in the novel.

The substance of the narrative is the life of Paco el del Molino, recalled as Millán prepares to say Requiem Mass on the first anniversary of the peasant's death. The priest remembers particular moments and episodes in Paco's life and especially those which involved Millán himself. There occurs a continual movement back and forth between the past and the present as the priest awaits the arrival of the congregation and reminisces about events in Paco's life from his baptism to his execution the previous year. Although central to the structure of the narrative, Millán is not used as first-person narrator but rather as a point of reference by the omniscient author. His thoughts serve to introduce an episode or incident in the past, then related by the author. Another source of information, but restricted to events immediately prior to and including Paco's death, are the fragments of the *romance*, interpolated throughout the narrative and recited by the acolyte as, from time to time, he reports to Millán and interrupts him in his thoughts. However, there is an early reminder of the inaccuracies of the *romance*:

*Ahí va Paco el del Molino,  
que ya ha sido sentenciado,  
y que llora por su vida  
camino del camposanto.*

Eso de llorar no era verdad, porque el monaguillo vió a Paco,  
y no lloraba.<sup>9</sup>

The early part of the novel deals with the baptism and infancy of Paco. At this stage the impression conveyed is that Millán is subject to certain minor human frailties, and, perhaps, a somewhat calculating attitude toward his parishioners: "Mosen Millan se interesaba por Paco pensando que sus padres eran poco religiosos. Creía el sacerdote que atrayendo al hijo, atraería tal vez al resto de la familia" (p. 22). Yet the bond that is seen to develop between the priest and the young child is not solely a ploy of the former. Millán feels a genuine affection for the boy that goes beyond a simple professional interest. A relationship begins to flourish that sees the child apparently under the sway of his "padre espiritual" and the remainder of the novel explores this relationship. Its gradual deterioration, culminating in the execution of Paco, is witnessed from two angles, that of the priest and that of the omniscient author—although the recollections of the former record only a minor part of the narrative. As has been stated previously, they serve rather to introduce episodes in Paco's life which are then recounted by the third-person narrator.

The first indication of any serious deficiency in Millán as a priest occurs with the visit to the dying man who lives in the caves on the outskirts of the village. This is also the first encounter with a social problem. The reader sees both Paco and the priest face to face with human suffering, specific with the pain and death-rattle of the peasant and broader with the suggestion of the misery experienced by a section of this rural society. It is significant that this episode comes almost immediately after the description of the ritual and mysteries of the church at Easter where, in the longest descriptive passage of the novel (pp. 24-27), Paco is shown to be moved and greatly impressed by the visual and emotional aspects of the Easter festival. The poverty and misery of the cave stand in marked contrast to the solemnity and pomp (albeit a little decrepit, particularly beneath its external appearances) of the church. The adversity that the child witnesses in the cave is also immediately impressive, but, as will be seen, with a more permanent effect. Apart from displaying the reactions of the young Paco, the church-cave contrast also serves

to suggest the basic irrelevance and remoteness of the Church in the social arena.

As Millán performs his duties in the cave he remains detached, acts mechanically, and, having fulfilled the canonical requirements of the Church, feels no desire to linger and perhaps comfort the dying man or his wife. He is, however, constrained to conceal his feelings for the sake of appearance: "Mosen Millán tenía prisa por salir, pero lo disimulaba porque aquella prisa le parecía poco cristiana" (p. 30). Doubts felt at this stage concerning the behaviour of the priest are confirmed during his subsequent conversation with the child. His platitudes stand in marked contrast to the simple concern and compassion of the young Paco. Millán's refusal to accept any responsibility or, indeed, to show an interest in alleviating the poverty and plight of these, his parishioners, is the first exposure of his limitations: "Esas cuevas que has visto son miserables pero las hay peores en otros pueblos" (p. 32). These words are echoed when Paco, as a young boy, discusses with the priest this same topic of the plight and misery of many of the villagers. Once again Millán turns his back on the problem: "-¿Qué miseria?- dijo Mosen Millán. Hay más miseria en otras partes que aquí" (p. 37).

If the episode of the dying man marks the beginning of the author's real undermining of Millán as a priest, it also heralds the awakening of Paco's social conscience. Henceforward he will exhibit a growing concern for the mundane plight of his fellows and will, when older, channel this concern into practical attempts to remedy such plight. In this way his efforts serve to contrast with Millán's apathy in the face of social problems. From this moment forward the priest moves gradually from affection toward Paco to resentment and at times even hostility, until he is ultimately instrumental in the destruction of the peasant.

Up to this point in the narrative the reader has been permitted access to few details surrounding the circumstances of Paco's death. However, on two earlier occasions, both during moments of Millán's contemplation, allusions are made to Paco's enemies. The first occurs shortly after the opening of the novel: "Casi toda la aldea había sido amiga de Paco, menos las dos familias más pudientes: don Valeriano y don Gumersindo. La tercera familia rica, la del señor Castulo Pérez, no era ni amiga ni enemiga" (p. 8). The second allusion comes after the reminiscences of the baptism of the child. Now the attitude of Castulo Pérez is suggested as unknown whereas previously it was reported to be one of indifference (p. 19). With the arrival of don Valeriano, the first to appear for the Requiem Mass, further information is given, this time of his complicity in the murder of Paco (p. 39). It transpires that the three men already mentioned and the priest will be the sole participants in the Mass and, ironically, it is this quartet which, in different ways, bears a prime responsibility for the events of the previous year. Although the actions of the three laymen cannot be condoned, it must be realized that they were simply protecting their own vested interests. This does not excuse their actions but does lead toward an appreciation of the motives of their conduct. On the other hand, Millán's interest should have been both the spiritual and physical well-being of his parishioners. Instead, he chose to ignore this and side with the powerful and in so doing abandoned those for whom he had a heavy responsibility and thus shirked his professional and moral obligations.

Millán's lack of compassion toward the dying man in the cave has

already been mentioned. He exhibits this same deficiency during the period of terror in the village and in between these critical moments in the narrative his stature is steadily eroded. At times the author's technique is merely to display the inconsistencies of the priest. An example of this occurs during the period when it was unknown whether or not Paco would have to undertake military service. The priest's advice to Paco's mother is that which one might expect from a man of the Church: ". . . aconsejó pedir el favor a Dios y merecerlo con actos edificantes" (p. 39). Yet, when Paco's father does Easter penance his motives are decried by this same priest: "-No tiene mérito lo de tu padre porque lo hace para no tener que apalabrar un mayoral en el caso de que tú tengas que ir al servicio" (p. 41). In fact, there is a strong possibility here that the priest is attempting merely to discredit the father in order, perhaps, to regain some of his own waning influence over the son.

As Paco takes an increasing interest in social affairs and at the same time moves further away from the priest, the latter reveals, in an animated exchange of views with the youth, an interesting facet of his personality—a belief in man's proclivity to evil and the consequent need for the forces of authority. Moreover, Millán shows scorn for the idealism that Paco displays and may already be seeing him as a reminder of his own deficiencies (p. 43). Yet there is never any suggestion in the novel that Paco is himself a model of wisdom and piety. He is often impatient and at times arrogant and foolhardy when confronted with opposition to his plans for improving the conditions of the villagers. Nevertheless, if he is overzealous on occasions one may sympathize; he is crusading against what are, in his opinion, certain long-standing social injustices in a system that sees the wealthy prosper at the expense of the poor. Unfortunately, Paco underestimates the power of those whom he opposes and the methods that they will employ to protect their own vested interests. Increasingly associated with these interests is the village priest. His role, initially and briefly that of mediator, the obvious stance for one who should wish only for tranquility and the avoidance of violence, soon changes to that of proponent of the position held by don Gumersindo, don Valeriano, and Cástulo Perez.

Millán's view of his own role is worthy of note and perhaps not entirely unexpected. He sees himself as a victim of the troubles, caught between opposing forces and at the same time losing the respect of the majority (p. 66). However, if the villagers are losing respect for their priest it is an understandable response to his failure to give any sort of lead or example during critical periods. When, for example, confirmation arrives of the flight of Alfonso XIII (April, 1931), Millán responds with two weeks of seclusion and then avoids mention of the event at the next service that he gives. His people expect some sort of comment on this momentous occurrence, and, when none is forthcoming, show their resentment by staying away from church the following Sunday (p. 57). Some thoughts or guidance on a temporal matter would not be out of place—yet the priest chooses to remain silent. Some years later this passivity is repeated, after an initial and somewhat insensible protest, when the killings begin in the village. No longer is it a question of what the politicians might be scheming in distant Madrid in April, 1931, but now the senseless and unjustified slaughter of his very own parishioners. Here, however, Millán's concern is technical and professional rather than humane: ". . . protesto ante don Valeriano . . . de que hubieran matado a los seis campesinos sin darles tiempo para confesarse" (p. 67).

Shortly after the beginning of the killings Paco disappears and Millán deliberately elicits the hiding-place from his father. The priest's initial reaction is one of alarm at the responsibility that he now bears (p. 71). He then immediately decides to put himself to the test and thereby prove his loyalty to Paco. He is at first successful in resisting the interrogation of the *falangistas* but several days later initiates his complicity in the murder of the peasant by revealing his whereabouts when promised that Paco will be brought to trial (p. 74). This naiveté in believing the word of these ruthless killers is rivalled only by the bias suggested by his failure to enquire of the charge against Paco. Passively accepting that there is just cause for his apprehension, the priest can, moreover, eschew responsibility for whatever is to befall Paco: "El quería a Paco. Lo quería mucho, pero sus afectos no eran por el hombre en sí mismo, sino *por Dios*. Era el suyo un cariño por encima de la muerte y la vida" (p. 74).

If Millán believes that he is helping to stop the bloodshed his hopes are soon dashed. Within half an hour of his disclosure Castulo Pérez arrives with the news that the women of the *carasol* have been machine-gunned and makes no attempt to conceal his amusement (pp. 74-75). The priest, in spite of being temporarily aware of his previous folly, goes to persuade Paco not to resist his assailants but to surrender and expresses his by now incomprehensible faith in the *falangistas*: "-Yo he venido aquí con la condición de que no te harán nada. Es decir, te juzgarán delante de un tribunal, y si tienes culpa, irás a la cárcel. Pero nada más" (p. 80).

Millán has one last opportunity to redeem himself and this occurs as Paco and two others are about to be executed. He states that he has been deceived yet is still unwilling to intercede on behalf of the condemned men. His "¿Qué puedo hacer?" (p. 83), is the reaffirmation of his own inertia and is distressingly consistent with his conduct and attitude throughout the novel. He asks the same question a second time and then indulges in Christian platitudes rather than at least attempt to express compassion or sorrow (p. 83). Although the final lines of the *romance* (p. 87) may suggest to those not present at the execution that Paco died with his religious faith unshaken, his actual dying words demonstrate an understandable and explicit indication of his belief as to where the immediate human responsibility for his death lies: "El me denunció . . . , Mosén Millán. Mosén Millán . . ." (p. 85).

A year of meditation following the death of Paco might have been expected to reveal to the priest not only the extent of his part in the tragic affair but also a realization of his own deficiencies. Yet despite occasional moments of remorse, Millán is still shown to be primarily concerned with the mechanics of his office. His personal failings have contributed markedly toward bloodshed, grief, and resentment. His lack of awareness of this is frightening and speaks for itself, as does the fact that the family and friends of Paco and the rest of the villagers have chosen not to attend the Mass. The significance of the near empty church and the irony of the sole presence of Gumersindo, Valeriano, and Castula Pérez would not escape the priest yet neither do these facts appear to cause any serious self-examination on his part.<sup>10</sup>

Sender's own condemnation is implied for the last time as, with the conclusion of the narrative, he presents the thoughts of a detached and dehumanized man of the Church: "Yo lo bauticé, yo le di la unción. Al menos—Dios lo perdone—nació, vivió y murió dentro de los ámbitos de la

Santa Madre Iglesia" (p. 87). The Requiem Mass that Millán then proceeds to conduct, ostensibly an act of contrition, is, in reality, merely another mechanical act, another Church ritual which serves to emphasize the priest's limitation as a man who is able to administer the rites of his religion but who has lost sight of its spirit and goals.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>First published in 1953 under the title *Mosén Millán* (México: Colección Aquelarre). The present title was first used in the Las Americas (New York) edition of 1960 and has been used in all subsequent editions except for the critical edition of R. M. Duncan (Boston: Heath, 1964).

<sup>2</sup>M. C. Peñuelas, *Conversaciones con R. J. Sender* (Madrid: Editorial Magisterio Español, 1970), p. 132.

<sup>3</sup>E. G. de Nora, *La novela española contemporánea*. Tomo II (Madrid: Gredos, 1968), p. 475.

<sup>4</sup>M. J. Bernadette, "Ramón Sender, cronista y soñador de una España nueva," in *Réquiem por un campesino español* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Proyección, 1969), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>J. Rivas, *El escritor y su senda* (México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1967), pp. 105-106 and 113.

<sup>6</sup>J. R. Marra-López, *Narrativa española fuera de España (1939-1961)* (Madrid: Guadarrama, 1963), p. 405.

<sup>7</sup>M. C. Peñuelas, *La obra narrativa de Ramón J. Sender* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971), p. 153.

<sup>8</sup>J. Uceda, "Consideraciones para una estilística de las obras de Ramón J. Sender," in *Réquiem* . . . (México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1970), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>R. J. Sender, *Mosén Millán* (México: Colección Aquelarre, 1953), p. 9. All references are to this edition.

<sup>10</sup>Indeed, the thoughts of Mosén Millán which conclude the narrative: "Ahora yo digo en sufragio de su alma esta misa de *réquiem*, que sus enemigos quieren pagar" (p. 87) emphasize the degree to which he has been able to supplant any self-recrimination with self-righteousness and in so doing to cast his ecclesiastical stone at Gumersindo, Valeriano, and Cástulo Pérez.