

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE DIARY OF A COUNTRY PRIEST / Journal d'un curé de campagne (1936)
Georges Bernanos (1888-1948)

The Catholic novel is a thing in itself, distinct from the novel created by the pen of adherents of other faiths, Christian or otherwise. Such a novel, to be worthy of the name, needs to feed off and into any number of themes peculiar to the perspectives hammered out in the early days of the establishment of the Christian Church. (We cannot overstate, in this regard, the seminal and collaborative thinking of the Council of Nicaea, in the first decades of the fourth century. It is, for example, the fruit of that Council's thinking that we owe the rich sacramental perspective which has sustained Catholicism to this day.) To be precise, and to bring our thinking down to cases, we can reflect a moment on a few of the dynamics driving a number of significantly Catholic novels.: Francois Mauriac: *Le Noeud de vipères*, 'evil, incest; jealousy'; Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Fall*, jealousy; Fyodor Dostoyevsky *The Brothers Karamazov*, jealousy, pride, malice.). Yes the Catholic novel is a thing in itself, though each individual Catholic novel is a thing in itself.

The Catholic novel with which we face ourselves right here strides directly onto the Catholic thematic. *The Diary of a country priest* must seem to open directly onto a scene exemplifying the bald display of attitudes fundamentally malign, from the standpoint of Catholic morality. We follow the narrator--or cinematographer as it may be, and the film craftsman of the present masterpiece was one of the great mood masters of modern film making. In Robert Bresson-- we find ourselves burrowing into the morose and tremulous mindset of a young priest just arriving at the front door of his first parish church assignment.. In a sense the entire, frequently bleak professional career of this young priest passes before our eyes and through our minds, as we watch him turn the bleak key into his future. We can see the nearly empty pews of the cold church, whose emptiness bespeaks the refusal of his too callow message of love, the bleak entanglement of the priest with the sordid love life of his patrons, the Count and Countess, and in the end his unstable death by stomach cancer. Yet after all, because we are dealing with a work of high art, we feel elevated and inspired.

