

The Tablet Interview - Once a Catholic...



'A flawed priest is far more interesting than a flawed plumber'

The Tablet Interview - Once a Catholic... screenwriter and renowned TV producer Jimmy McGovern talks to Peter Stanford

He might have lost his faith, but as the Liverpoolian scriptwriter tells Peter Stanford, his stories reflect a deep and sympathetic fascination with Catholicism

“I always wonder why there aren’t more dramas about Catholicism,” muses Jimmy McGovern. No one could accuse the Liverpoolian screenwriter of not pulling his weight in this regard.

Jimmy McGovern

His 1994 film, *Priest*, about a cleric struggling with his sexuality was both Bafta-nominated and banned by the Church in Ireland. His 2002 TV movie, *Sunday*, portrayed clerics on the front line during Bloody Sunday in Derry, and now his new high-profile BBC1 six parter, *Broken*, stars Sean Bean as the worldly, selfless Fr Michael Kerrigan, attempting to serve his God and his blighted inner-city parish.

“Everything I have ever watched that prominently features a priest,” says McGovern, “has always been a good film. As a subject, it just lends itself to drama so well.” Compulsive list-makers will, of course, be able to name exceptions, but the man who started out on *Brookside* and made himself a byword for gritty social realism with, among others, *Cracker*, *The Lakes*, *Hillsborough* and *The Street* is talking about his own impression. Those who laugh at or deride the Church don’t figure much on his horizon.

“A flawed priest is far more interesting than a flawed plumber,” continues this master storyteller, warming to his argument. “Graham Greene’s whisky priests were far more interesting than an alcoholic schoolteacher. Priests have this moral code. They know what they should do, and I am fascinated by people who know what they should do, but find the cost of doing it too high.” Classic McGovern territory lies where human tragedy accompanies decisions that change lives.

At a screening of the first episode of *Broken*, we were given a stern warning against revealing too much of a heartbreaking plot, but suffice to say Bean’s pitch-perfect Fr Michael has his own demons as, every day without fail, he emerges from his lonely presbytery, craggy-faced and badly shaven, to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the poor, the disenfranchised and the plain desperate among his dwindling congregation, people who have only him to rely on.

Kerrigan is, McGovern emphasises, for the avoidance of doubt, “a smashing priest”. But doubt is woven into every detail of the episode I watched. Vocation is, the writer agrees, not for wimps. “There is the sheer muscularity required to function as a priest in a poor parish versus all the ethereal, abstract stuff, the bells and the smells.”

The moment that brought tears to my eyes was when Fr Michael, ushered into a room of unspeakable family tragedy, insists on lighting a candle to symbolise Christ’s presence in this scene of desolation. Does he cry, I wonder, as he writes in his shed? “You can’t expect an actor to cry unless you cry when you write the words,” he answers. “Words are the rungs up an emotional ladder.”

Small of stature, but with a youthful energy and mischief in his eyes, this grandfather of four feels much younger than his 67 years. McGovern is as strongly associated in the public mind with his home town of Liverpool as he is for writing about the Catholicism in which he was raised as the fifth of nine children in Saint Francis Xavier’s Jesuit-run parish in Everton – known throughout the city as SFX.

Though career success means that this former teacher has now moved out to “the posh part”, in the world he recreates on screen McGovern hasn’t travelled far. *Broken* is filmed in the vast, crumbling beacon that is SFX’s church – the place where, he adds for good measure, his great-grandfather received Holy Communion from the priest-poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The Catholicism the series describes may be bang up to date – Fr Kerrigan follows to the letter Pope Francis’ instruction to priests (made in Rio on his first overseas trip in 2013) to “get out of your churches and serve the people in need” – yet the picture painted also owes a good deal to the world of McGovern’s own childhood and upbringing in the 1950s and 1960s, steeped in the faith to such an extent that he considered becoming a priest himself.

“When I was about 11 or 12, I definitely questioned whether God was calling me. In those days in SFX Primary School, we had priests left, right and centre. We were always in church: Mass and Benediction, Confession, funeral Masses. So I wasn’t unusual. Vocation was a question that lots of boys asked themselves at 11.”

It didn’t detain him for too long, he makes plain. In his teens, he slowly turned his back on the Church. “I’d have loved there to be a particular moment, but it just diminished. I just don’t believe.” He says it not defiantly, but with a note of sadness. “I’ve lost my faith and I’ve never got it back, even though I

have been open to it returning.”

Not that he doesn't attend the occasional Mass. Indeed, he is off to the funeral of one of the Hillsborough campaigners once we've finished. “One-by-one they are all dropping dead,” he remarks with the shared anger that remains so visceral all over Liverpool at the cover-up by South Yorkshire Police of their part in the deaths of 96 Liverpool football fans in 1989, “before the bastards are called upon for their misdeeds in court. They've seen truth but they won't see justice.”

But the Catholicism of his youth continues to shape the adult he has become, privately as well as professionally. “When my dad died, my oldest brother, Joey, was the first on the scene. He was a non-believer by that stage. He was grieving, and he kept saying to me that my dad had ‘died in rags’. He'd died in bed and he wore a shirt in bed and the shirt was all creased and looked bad. But when Joey said that, I just replied immediately, ‘Christ died in rags’. It was very unusual for us to talk as adults in those terms, but it came out so naturally.”

However sympathetic a picture *Broken* paints of the modern priesthood – as, indeed, notes McGovern, did Priest, despite what the Irish bishops said about it, and despite the ban imposed on the use of Church premises in Liverpool for filming – the writer's memories of growing up Catholic are hardly rosy.

“I passed the 11-plus and went to the grammar school in leafy Woolton,” he recalls. “In hindsight, it was a bloody awful school. There was a paedophile priest there who got in the showers with us after football matches.” He says it without apparent rancour.

“It is a shame really because all I have ever encountered since is good priests.” The damage, he implies but doesn't say, had already been done. “When I was there, it was the height of liberation theology, and there were Jesuit priests dying in Latin America on behalf of the people, but all we had was the reactionary Jesuits in SFX school.”

Others, I suggest, might have reacted by never having a good word to say for the Church ever after. He laughs at such a black-and-white reaction. “I've had a stammer all my life. In the world of stammering, there is a very PC approach. You don't say ‘stutter’, you say ‘stammer’. And I always think, ‘On yer bike, it's made my life hell. I'll treat it any way I want. How dare you tell me anything.’ And I feel much the same about the Catholic Church. It made my life a misery for a few years and, because it did, I will deal with it however I like. It is not your place to contradict me, thank you very much. It's a bit late.”

He barely leaves a breath before adding: “At the same time I'd never attack the faith. At its best, it's wonderful.” And, as if to emphasise that deep and abiding fascination with Catholicism – so deep, indeed, to make words like “lapsed” redundant – his definition of what the “broken” in the title of his new series refers to comes as a surprise. I have assumed it was “broken Britain”, in that phrase beloved of right-wing politicians, or a “broken Church”, confused about its role in a secular society, or even a “broken priesthood”, reaching a crisis with falling vocations leaving those who remain under unbearable strain.

But no. “It is the broken bread of the Eucharist,” McGovern tells me. I need him to explain. “I wish I

could,” he replies. “It seems to me we should always associate the breaking of the bread with the breaking of the human body. And if that is not uppermost in our minds, then we are missing something. It’s more than breaking bread for ease of consumption. It is breaking bread to remind us of a broken body.”

We are back to Christ dying in rags.

Jimmy McGovern's latest work, Broken, is on BBC1 on 23 May at 9pm

Peter Stanford - The Tablet