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[The Canon]

translated from the Portuguese by Mick Greer



*O CÓNEGO* [THE CANON]

by A. M. Pires Cabral

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My name is Salviano Taveira. Salviano de Jesus Pinto Taveira, to be more precise, more complete. I'm twenty-six years old. I'm a priest.

Less than a year ago, I made my parents' dream – to have a priest as a son – come true. Probably something they had dreamt about since they got married, with the pious aim of contributing to the multiplication of the species determined by God on the sixth day of Creation, or even earlier. And it really took hold at the moment when, on 13th February 1923, around seven in the morning, the experienced old woman who was midwife to every child born in our village, picked me up and, after a quick check, said 'it's a boy'.

– May God choose him for His service – said my mother, still weeping with labour pains.

And my father, coming in just in time to hear this wish:

– Amen!

And if the check had had a different result and the midwife had said 'it's a girl', the dream would have simply gone through a slight twist imposed by the sex and become having a nun as a daughter. They had vowed that the first fruit of their union, if God saw fit to grant it, would be destined for His service. It ended up being me, and an only child to boot. As I've said, I made my parents' dream come true less than a year ago.

Why did they dream such a dream? In the great noble families, one of the male offspring, the second born, had almost inevitably to follow an ecclesiastical career. He would end up being a social ornament for his own family, that member of the Church. But my family was neither great, nor noble, nor thought about social ornaments. On the contrary, it was the most plebeian and humble any family could be. But plebeian and humble families also have such ambitions. Don't they say around here that flowers bloom and grow on dunghills? (May God pardon the comparison, which could be taken as immodesty, due to the part about me – the flower – and cruel, due to the part about my family – the dunghill. But it's only an expression.)

For my parents, having a priest as a son could, for instance, be an investment in the future: mine and theirs. (In the case of a nun as a daughter, the invest-



ment would be halved: it would only be her future that was guaranteed, as convent life doesn't bring in as much as a parish, however small it is.) In those hard times, nobody could begrudge them wanting to give their son an 'upright' life, as is sometimes said: a life with no place for the tiredness and uncertainties of hard work tormenting every passing day. The people say, somewhat malevolently, that 'no-one in the Church is left in the lurch', meaning that a priest will always get something out of his parish. It's a cruel saying, ignoring the truly pitiful condition of many priests up in those wretched villages lost among the mountains... But it's said. And my parents believed it too. Anything, basically, would be better than having to turn your hand to the soil.

However, it was not just the, let's say, materialist motivation that prompted their dream. That would have been far from the most important thing. They also had a great and genuine sense of giving, and of a crusade *ad majorem gloriam Dei* within them. Because, in spite of being poor and uneducated, my parents were people of great and deep-seated piety, scrupulous followers of each and every one of the commandments of God and the Holy Mother Church. It's probably worth mentioning here that, along with grinding labour on two strips of land, my father exercised the functions of a sacristan in our village; whilst my mother combined taking care of the altar of the miraculous Our Lady of the O with being a catechist.

Come what may, they had that dream and managed to convey it to me, through some obscure contagious mechanism, without the need to put pressure on me except very discretely; instilling in me, almost from the cradle, the consolations that holy religion reserved for those who served it with virtue. As time passed, the dream – which now was mine as well – blossomed naturally into a clear vocation. What's certain is that from when I was very young I had felt good, wonderfully good, inside the doors of our little village church, as if it were my natural place. Although today – at a time in my life when I've seen Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, during a final year seminary student trip, as well as the cathedrals of Salamanca, Zamora and Braga, and other equally grand churches – although today, as I was saying, I see our little village church in all its bare, almost moving, humility. When I was a child it seemed as grand as a royal palace. I would often leave my childish games to sneak off to the church. Its smells caressed my senses: the burning wax, the incense during divine office, even the musty sweetness of the old, damp altarpieces rotting away. My eyes were also exalted: I spent hours marvelling at the intricate carving on the altars, in which unknown 18<sup>th</sup> century imaginations had sculpted angels, some with only faces, wings and feet; others with whole bodies including pudenda, and huge-beaked birds greedily



eating bunches of grapes and managing, at the same time, to maintain a vigilant air. The altar of the souls, particularly, made a deep impression on me, with its symbolic force and depictions of half human, half-reptilian devils: not only as a memento homo, but also from an artistic or scenic point of view. And lastly, the ringing Latin of the religious services – whose prosody, for children of my age, was only useful for making fun of, hinting at weird correspondences in Portuguese that had nothing to do with the real translation – had immense resonance for me, suggestive but mysterious. *Stella maris*... What did *stella maris* mean? And *turris eburnea*? And *qui tollis peccata mundi*? I didn't know then; but the simple resonance of the words filled my soul with the certainty of what must be great and good things, pleasing to the Lord.

At four or five years old, I was a little angel in the simple processions on Saint Eustaquio's feast day, offering God, in atonement for my sins – and at that time, my sins went no further than some bit of venial naughtiness for which 'Jesus' would have been angry and told me off in a voice of thunder – the no small sacrifice of the weight of wings on my back, a wig as big as a lion's mane over my forehead dripping with sweat; and hard sandals, made for different feet from mine (generally smaller). A little later, I appeared in the ranks of the crusaders, proudly bearing a white sash with the scarlet cross of Christ over my heart. When I was ten I was allowed, every now and again, to assist Father Clemente at vespers during Mary's month.

The venerable bishop of the diocese, who once came to Covelas to conduct Confirmation, noticed my behaviour, such a contrast to the mountain ways of some of the other kids of my age; who were playing around and pulling faces behind the backs of their catechists, even on that solemn occasion. It seemed to me that his Most Reverend Excellency murmured something about me into Father Clemente's ear, and that something must have been praise because as he said it, my lord bishop never took his eyes off me, and all this made me blush with pleasure. And this was at roughly the same time that I, when asked by the teacher to write a composition about my plans for the future, declared that my deepest wish was to go to the Seminary. The teacher thought she should send for my mother and tell her of my inclination. It was the time to support or, if considered inappropriate, dismiss the idea. My mother held up her hands to heaven in a fervent gesture of gratitude. She had clearly chosen to support it: the long-held dream had taken another step towards realisation. The next day, my father went to find out how such things were done from Father Clemente. My schoolmates started calling me 'Priesty'.

To come to the point – because it isn't my own story I want to tell – I'll just say that I fulfilled the dream after attending the Minor Seminary at Vinhais and then the Major Seminary at Bragança with enthusiasm and profit – in keeping with my religious fervour. I left there tonsured and supplied with Dogmatic and Moral Theology, the Holy Scriptures, Ecclesiastical History, Canon Law and more than enough learning to equip me as priest in this tiny parish of Santa Maria Madalena de Vilarinho dos Castelhanos, where Lord Bishop Abílio Vaz das Neves, the venerable Bishop of Bragança and Miranda, benevolently gave me a flock to shepherd.



Lord Bishop Abílio, having heard the best reports of me from the rector himself and the wisest teachers of the Bragança Seminary – because truly (and may God forgive the vanity with which I say this) I always did everything I could to be the best student on the course; and I think I achieved it. Lord Bishop Abílio, as I said, called me into his presence on 16th March 1949 and instructed me, in his pleasant Mirandese accent, to present myself at Vilarinho dos Castelhanos. I received the incumbency with satisfaction - more than satisfaction, with tumultuous delight –, because it would mark the beginning of a useful life, in which I could guarantee a living, even if a parsimonious one, and perhaps help my parents, whose age now made working the land and taking care of the church arduous tasks.

However, there was also a touch of sadness in receiving it, as part of my dream was to exercise the duties of a priest in my home village – Covelas – hoping to fill my old parents with pride and joy. That part of the dream would have to wait for a while, but did not die in my heart. The Covelas parish priest, the reverend Father Clemente, was over eighty years old with all the accompanying ailments, and would not be able to continue in the parish for very much longer. It might then be possible for me to exert some influence over Lord Bishop Abílio, so that he would send me to my native land. I consoled myself, therefore, by seeing Vilarinho dos Castelhanos as a halfway stage, necessary to complete my maturing, so as one day to enter Covelas in the fullness of apostolic and casuistic proficiency.

Be that as it may, it was necessary to obey. At the end of my interview with my Lord Bishop Abílio, whose ring I kissed repeatedly, overcome by gratitude – a gesture which seemed to make the venerable prelate somewhat uncomfortable, but one which I could not repress –, I went back to Covelas to give my parents the good news. Their eyes, like mine, filled with tears. Of happiness, undoubtedly, first and foremost. But there was also some disappointment, because they had dreamed the same dream as me and also saw this part of it delayed, at an age when delays had begun to seem like definitive frustrations.

I spent two days equipping myself materially and spiritually for the change. I then mounted the family donkey, which took me to Macedo de Cavaleiros, crossing the Serra de Bornes, with my father accompanying me on foot, taciturn but determined; every now and again applying the disciplinary stick to the beast's flank, if it stopped to graze on some appetising grass on wayside.

In Macedo de Cavaleiros, I tearfully said goodbye to my father, who cried as much as I did, and took the train to Rossas. I won't mention how bathed in tears I left my sainted mother in Covelas. Although you, reader, must surely have already guessed: chiefly if the ups and downs of life have separated you from your mother for some time. In Rossas, there was another donkey waiting for me, this one lent by the reverend Father Albino Paiva, a holy man to whom I've been so much in debt since my time in the Seminary. Riding this donkey, I followed the beaten track to Vilarinho dos Castelhanos. (...)

