

The Ongoing Present

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, it's a privilege to be asked to launch The Ongoing Present by Fr Michail MacGreil. I notice some raised eyebrows at my presence here. Some of you are rightly wondering, what is he doing here? Why does this honour fall upon me?

Why is a fake priest launching a notable Jesuit's book?
Why is a lapsed Catholic about to sing the praises of a man of such deep faith?
Why is a hedonist like myself promoting the worldview of an ascetic like our esteemed author?

Well there are 3 reasons for this unlikely arrangement.
Firstly, Fr McGreil has been a friend to my family for four generations now, from my grandfather Mick in the Irish army, to my own son, Red.
Secondly, he's a man I've come to respect for his integrity, his just causes and for doing something incredibly rare in Ireland, practicing what he preaches. If only all Mayomen in leadership positions could be so obliging.

Thirdly, the Bull Mc Greil, as you know, is a very strong-minded individual so, once I was asked, there wasn't really a chance I was going to be able to worm my way out of the privilege.

Naturally like most sensible people I dread being asked to read the work of people I know, absolutely dread it, never mind endorsing it in public. What if I don't like it? What if it's terrible? My fears in this case were thankfully unfounded. The good news is, the book's not too bad at all. In fact it's something of an epic.

And I have to say it's about time a man of his stature wrote an autobiography of sorts, when you consider Roy Keane is on his second, Wayne Rooney is on his third book, a man who spends most of his day on a Playstation, 3 books. The story so far.

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So what is it, The Ongoing Present? Good question. It's a part-memoir. Part history book. Part ...Utopian philosophy. Briefly I will try and give you a hint of what's in it. Or at least what I took from it. Which of course is not the same thing at all. In a nutshell, Fr McGreil distils many of his multifarious life experiences and embraces most of his major concerns. It is I believe his Magnum Opus.

And I won't lie to you. The Ongoing Present is a long book but always clear-headed and infinitely readable. Merciful man that he is, he spares us from sociological jargon, not too much 'alienation' and 'anomie', as he shares his reflections on the world around him, from his childhood in Mayo to the present day, during a time of great personal, social and cultural change, home and abroad.

It roughly goes in chronological order.

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The early part of the book is a rich and detailed evocation of rural Ireland between the wars. He fondly remembers the family life, social life, working life and religious life of a vibrant community on the side of Croagh Patrick; he records his growing pride in newly independent Ireland and his appreciation for nature and the rhythms and simple pleasures of life. To this day, correct me if I'm wrong, and I know he will, he still refers to himself as a peasant ...and proud of it. And why wouldn't he?

Anybody who has had the good fortune to visit his cottage in Loughloon will forgive him if he sometimes idealizes what must have been a harsh existence. But his extraordinary recall and attention to detail ensures that this small section of the book will be a great resource for historians interested in this now-vanished Ireland.

More importantly, the values and virtues instilled in him then have always been a great source of strength to him, as he observed the staggering changes in our society over a number of decades.

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The bulk of the book deals with the extraordinary road and often surprising turns his life has taken since he left the bog.

As most of you here know, he has had a long and distinguished career, as soldier, priest, teacher, sociologist, philosopher, you name it, trade unionist, utopian dreamer, is he a doctor, probably, have I left anything out? He comes across as a bit of a Forrest Gump, and I mean that in a good way, in that he has been there or thereabouts at many of the key events in 20th century Irish history.

In the book, he also comes across as learned, authoritative, compassionate and I think it's fair to say quite a contrary man at times. Fair play to him. There was always plenty to be contrary about. It strikes me, however, that he has always applied his knowledge and experience in a practical way, most notably to help others and promote social justice.

It is this tireless commitment to social justice that best sums up the book and the author.

Within these pages, he eloquently outlines his involvement in millions of campaigns - from travellers rights to world peace, the Irish language to prison reform. I'm not going to mention them all or we'll be here til Christmas.

I knew of him primarily for his pioneering work on prejudice and tolerance in Ireland, which he touches on here, but there was so much more that I didn't know. I was constantly startled by some of his revelations. Did you know Fr McGrail campaigned for conjugal rights for married prisoners in Mountjoy? Yep. Did you know that he lived for some time in a caravan with members of the travelling community? And in 1966, he even rode shotgun with the police in Philadelphia, a daredevil, 30 years before the reality show COPS. Most surprising, to me at least, Fr Mc Greil testified in court, on behalf of David Norris, arguing that the criminalization of homosexual behavior between consenting adults was in fact discriminatory. This would be typical of the man, never afraid to go against the grain.

I should point out that he is not merely blowing his own trumpet in these instances, he's reflecting on the various events and placing them in a socio-historical context.

His journey, the narrative spine of the book, is often punctuated with profound observations, considered and heartfelt, about a huge range of subjects, from the personal to the public, the micro to the macro, Jesuitical affairs to the Cold War. No issue escapes his roving eye and critical analysis. Mind you, he's generous and fair-minded to most of the people he met along the way. So you can all breathe easily.

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Towards the end of the book, we get the sense that his faith despite recent scandals is as strong as ever. And his politics are unwaveringly of the left. He's still extremely bolshie.

He's very clear sighted in his analysis of domestic and world affairs, especially on the perils of liberal capitalism. While he is in no way despairing, he is also concerned about the consequences of materialism, individualism and the decline of religion on society.

Of course, one mightn't agree with everything he says. Or anything he says. But he's never less than provocative. For example he argues passionately for the introduction of a maximum wage. Good luck selling that idea in this town!

He also believes that all ministers of justice should, on taking office, spend at least 3 nights in a prison cell. Only 3?

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In conclusion, Fr Mc Greil as an exercise used to ask his students what they would like inscribed on their tombstones. For his own, he toyed with the following:

'Here Lies the mortal remains of Michail McGreil. The world is bad enough, but it might have been worse without him.' Having read the book, I can't argue with that.

Unless you're a justice minister or a very high earner, you'd probably have to agree with that epitaph too.

It is my pleasure to commend The Ongoing Present to you.

Ardal O'Hanlon