

## BOOK REVIEW

# Mong, Ambrose. 2025. **Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Portrayal of Priests in Fact and Fiction**

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Reviewed by Andre Joseph Theng

Mong's latest volume examines the figure of the Catholic priest. Being a priest himself working in Hong Kong, it is no surprise that Mong is afforded a personal and deep understanding of the priesthood, including their foibles, imperfections, but also of their heroism and sanctity. Roman Catholic priests all around the world are united firstly by their promises (or in the case of religious priests, vows) of chastity, poverty, and obedience. Their distinctive way of life renders them a fascinating subject both in fact and fiction – Mong's volume thus examines seven cases, basically equally divided into real-life examples and ones in literary texts.

It is certainly a timely intervention, and Mong's introduction provides insight into his motivations, namely, the negative press surrounding Catholic priests in recent years due to sexual or financial misconduct. Mong writes: "While we cannot ignore these evil deeds, we must remember that these wayward clerics do not represent the entire priesthood" (xii). He seeks to complexify the person of the priest beyond one-dimensional stereotypes associated with wrongdoing and irrelevance. The theme of complex figures certainly shines through in each of the chapters, much to Mong's credit. Each of these stories will prove to be particularly interesting for readers learning about them for the first time, but certainly also the juxtaposition of these characters in a single volume will provide food for thought on how they might relate to each other, and what they tell us about priests more generally.

The first chapter examines two Chinese bishops, Ignatius Kung and Aloysius Jin Luxian, who lived in similar times but whose differing responses to persecution by Communist authorities proved controversial. Both Kung and Jin were arrested in 1955; Kung refused to lead the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and was a staunch critic of the Communist regime, retaining a hardline stance throughout his life. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and was held in solitary confinement

for many years. In contrast, Jin chose a more conciliatory position and engaged with Communist authorities to “keep Catholicism alive in China” (12). His cooperation with Communist leaders following his 1982 release from prison allowed him success in reestablishing the church in Shanghai. These differing choices towards engaging with anti-Christian civil leaders remain a much relevant question in the present day, both in China and elsewhere. In the Chinese context, the controversial 2018 Vatican–China “deal”, or provisional agreement, has proved contentious; its implementation might well have impacted Cardinal Pietro Parolin’s papacy chances at the 2025 conclave as he is widely thought to be the architect of the deal.

The second and third chapters examine Pedro Arrupe, SJ, and Oscar Romero respectively. Arrupe was a long-time Superior General of the Society of Jesus who steered the Jesuits through the changes of Vatican II. The chapter largely focuses on the person of Arrupe, and how his experience in his youth and in Japan during the Second World War and the atomic explosion in Hiroshima shaped his leadership later in life. Mong highlights how Arrupe’s focus on the poor and marginalized influenced Francis’ papacy, which was characterized by a great concern for social justice and issues. Especially moving is Mong’s reflections on the final years of Arrupe’s life, when a stroke rendered him paralysed but during which time also “displayed an indomitable spirit” (35). Today there is an active cause for his canonization, and in November 2024 the case was formally moved to the Vatican marking a step closer towards Beatification.

Chapter 3’s examination of Oscar Romero bears comparison to those in the preceding two chapters, with Romero, an El Salvadoran bishop who was gunned down whilst saying mass, displaying shades of the stories of the Bishops in China and of Arrupe. Like Jin and Kung, Romero worked amidst a difficult political context marked by state repression and civil war, and like Arrupe, displayed a close affinity for the marginalized. Especially insightful is the highlighting of Romero’s own transformation as he was initially considered a moderate figure keen to “maintain good relations with the government than to serve the needs of the people” (41). Yet his experience as bishop caused him to actively speak up for the sufferings of the people, defending activist priests and he courageously accompanied his flock. Romero’s life demonstrates a response to poverty not just of the material kind, but also how “the root of poverty is injustice, which is the refusal to love” (38).

The volume comes to life in the next four chapters, each featuring figures of priests from works of fiction, who are all complex characters in their own right. Prior to becoming a priest, Mong studied English Literature to a postgraduate level and worked as a secondary school teacher, and his careful literary analysis shines through in these chapters filled with pedagogical clarity and analytical insight. His affinity with these characters causes us to consider them alongside the historical figures earlier discussed, and indeed, their complexity renders such comparison

worthwhile. These chapters remind me of other texts which stand at the intersection of literature and theology, for example, the work of Luke Bell OSB, monk of Quarr Abbey, who, like Mong, was also a student and teacher of English literature. In 2024, Pope Francis wrote a letter on the role of literature on priestly formation (Francis 2024), where he recalled his experience as a literature teacher at a Jesuit school in Santa Fe. Francis wrote: “literature is thus a ‘path’ to helping shepherds of souls enter into a fruitful dialogue with the culture of their time” whilst highlighting the many benefits of reading widely. “This approach to literature, which makes us sensitive to the mystery of other persons, teaches us how to touch their hearts.”

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* respectively. Cather’s characters Jean Latour and Joseph Valliant are closely based on the historical Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the first archbishop of Santa Fe, and his vicar general, Joseph Machebeuf. We immediately see here the relationship between “fact” and “fiction”, as works of fiction draw from historical figures. The ambivalence of Cather’s Latour is illustrated by his hard work in evangelizing in a missional context but who also sought to leave a legacy of his own in a not altogether selfless way, building a Romanesque Cathedral that he hoped would become his legacy long after his death. His struggles as a priest are further illustrated by the depression and doubt he experienced as a result of a feeling of the ineffectiveness of his apostolate. Yet in other instances, such as a care-free motorcycle ride with a friend, we see how the priest comes to terms with his person and his life. A pattern of an increased openness to Grace is observed, as well as an openness to a greater generosity in interpreting doctrine in his ministry.

An increased openness is similarly observed in the “Whisky Priest” in Greene’s *The Power and Glory*. Also set in Mexico, Greene’s characters were distinctly imperfect and flawed, and the “whisky priest” is no exception: often drunk, he is lazy and had fathered a child. Yet Greene emphasizes the office of the priest, where the ontological nature of ordination renders his sacraments effective regardless of his personal failings: *ex opere operato*. Greene finds merit in the flawed characters, complexifying figures who would otherwise be easily dismissed as “bad priests”. The “whisky priest”, who has an allegorical quality due to being unnamed, is keenly aware and guilty of his own shortcomings and remains faithful to his ministry.

Finally, Chapter 7’s discussion of Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*, since made into a 2016 film by Martin Scorsese, narrates the life of a Portuguese Jesuit, Father Sebastian Rodrigues, who ministers in Japan amidst Christian persecution in the mid-seventeenth century. Christians were forced to apostatize by stepping on a bronze figure of Christ known as a *fumie*. It is here that Mong brings fresh insight to understanding the dilemma associated with such an act, radically suggesting that stepping on the figure is in fact an affirmation of faith, comparing Rodrigues to the apostle Peter – “Like Peter, the priest understands the teachings of Jesus more deeply after his denial” (126). Mong

suggests: “Rodrigues’s stepping on the *fumie* is an affirmation of faith in a forgiving God”, arguing that there is a nuance to the momentary “misstep” of the priest, and that a more generous interpretation would in fact point to God’s mercy and grace, despite his silence. Mong explores this theme more fully in a separate article (Mong 2025), in the process also making a distinction between masculine and feminine faces of Christ.

In his conclusion, Mong writes about a dear former superior whom he looked up to greatly, the late Father Bonifacio Garcia Solis OP, four-term superior of the Rosary Province of the Order of Preachers. The heroic qualities with which Mong associates Solis will not be unfamiliar to most people who have known priests themselves, especially in a personal capacity. In parts of the world where there are so few priests ministering to large congregations, it can be difficult to develop a nuanced view of the person of the priest especially when viewed only from afar, or in the context of ministry or sacraments. Yet some of us who have had the privilege of knowing priests more personally will immediately identify with the ambivalent qualities that Mong consistently describes in this book, priests who are deeply faithful but who are also often imperfect, disagreeable, and who struggle greatly. This will be true even in peacetime, let alone the many challenging contexts that the protagonists of these chapters feature in. This volume is thus in essence, a loving ode to the Catholic priest, priests whom we know (“our” priests), and is movingly personal and reflective. One point I would have liked to have seen better explored is a more explicit and consistent comparison of the different characters studied here, especially between the historical and fictitious examples. At the same time, Pope Francis in his letter describes an experience of literature as a “training in discernment”, sensitizing us to “the relationship between forms of expression and meaning”. It is perhaps left to us to make these links for ourselves. Finally, the volume leaves us to pray for and give thanks for the priests who work tirelessly in the vineyard of the Lord for the salvation of souls, giving wholly of themselves, “warts and all”.

## About the Reviewer

Andre Joseph Theng completed his PhD at the University of Edinburgh, writing about Catholic social media from a sociolinguistic perspective. He is interested in media representations of Catholicism, especially in digital contexts.

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