

# Catholics, sympathy and why it's important to think like a murderer

Like many other people, I've stopped reading social media very often, because the way so many people despise so many other people gets too depressing. Wading into the hatefulness makes me feel icky.

Even Catholics speak that way of each other, if far enough apart in theology or politics. Few seem even to try to understand why the people on the other side think the way they do. They don't sympathize with their targets.

That's true of most of us, to some degree. We don't sympathize as easily or as readily as we should. We don't automatically try to understand how the other man came to be wrong, especially if we think he's really wrong.

Here are two priests, one real and one fictional, who exemplify real sympathy and its effects.

The first I came across looking up the great Maisie Ward's books on [Internet Archive](#), and that priest reminded me of the second. (Ward was a major Catholic writer, writing the first biography of G.K. Chesterton among many other books, wife to Frank Sheed, and with him, the owner of the once very important publisher Sheed & Ward.)

Father Basil Maturin had been an Anglican minister who entered the Church in 1897 at the age of 51 and was ordained a priest the next year. Like St. Thomas and St. John Henry Newman, Ward writes, he saw that he couldn't convince someone unless he understood what that person wanted out of life.

Ward calls this "an instinctive necessity." Maturin "saw into

his hearers' minds so clearly that he was hampered in putting out his own view until he had dealt with theirs."

Ward also calls his mind "a very modern one." I think she means a more sympathetic one, in contrast with the more judgmental style of Victorian Christianity. A style that has returned, at least on social media, now more vicious and more divisive than the worst Victorians ever thought about being. If so, three cheers for Father Maturin.

He read a lot, she writes, and would come to breakfast feeling "the most intense sympathy" with the book's main character. He "would make every allowance of heredity and environment, longing to stretch a point in interpreting the moral law, so as to find an excuse for a character who had touched his heart." He was, she concludes, "in general far readier to admire than to criticize."

"All his life he was studying men," Ward explains, "and to a rare psychological insight he added a depth of human sympathy that made his words go home to all who heard them." Another convert priest, R.H. Benson, told the story of a young friend coming to him after hearing Maturin preach, enraged that Benson had given away his secrets. He protested that he hadn't. "But you must have told him," the young man said. "He knew all about me. He preached at me the entire time."

The second priest is Chesterton's fictional detective Father Brown. Father Maturin showed the effect of sympathy in understanding others. Father Brown shows the effect in understanding oneself.

In the story "The Secret of Father Brown," the first story in the [book](#) of the same title, Father Brown has to explain how he solves crimes to an American reporter who's told him that people believe he has occult powers. "I thought and thought about how a man might come to be like that," he said, "until I realized that I really was like that, in everything except

actual final consent to the action.”

The reporter, a secular man who didn't understand this kind of deep sympathy, doesn't get it. A slightly exasperated Father Brown describes in detail what he does, how he puts himself inside the mind of a murderer – which is not as foreign to him as we would like to think. He then concludes: “No man's really any good till he knows how bad he is, or might be.”

And then, because it's Chesterton, Father Brown places himself, and all men, with those people the “good” look down on: no man's any good “till he's realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery, and sneering, and talking about ‘criminals,’ as if they were apes in a forest 10 thousand miles away; till he's got rid of all the dirty self-deception of talking about low types and deficient skulls; till he's squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal, and kept him safe and sane under his own hat.”

We need Father Maturin's generosity and Father Brown's realism. If nothing else, that would make us better people on Facebook and Twitter.

*David Mills writes from Pennsylvania.*