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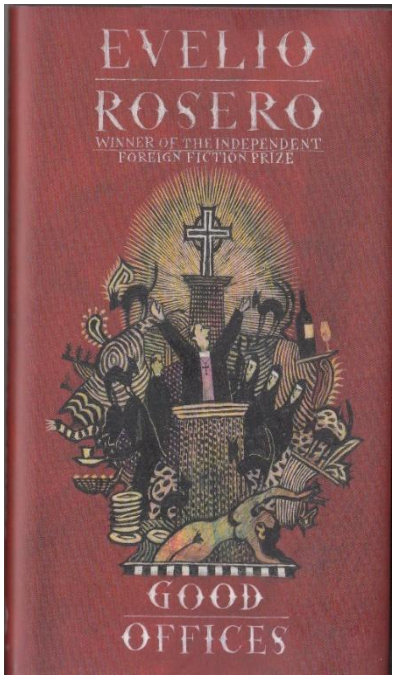
About the novel Good offices by Evelio Rosero[1]

Ciro A. Páez

When acts of mercy triumph in a society,
justice is in tatters.
Octavio Amórtegui, De incógnito en la vida.



According to Herman Melville, two things are required to write a memorable book: a great setting and a powerful theme. He knew what he was talking about, as he sought this combination of elements in several of his works. Take, for example, chapters VII to IX of Moby Dick, which describe a seafaring chapel in New Bedford, with a pulpit shaped like a ship's bow and ram. A venerable old man, Father Mapple, climbs up to this unusual pulpit via a rope ladder, like those used by sailors on sailing ships, to speak to his parishioners about the Book of Jonah.

What makes his sermon memorable is that both the

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speaker and the place where he speaks are perfectly suited to the extraordinary importance of the chosen topic: the problem of salvation. Who better to speak about Jonah, the prophet swallowed by a whale, than a seasoned sailor who has suffered firsthand the dangers and the inclemency of the sea? What better audience for the subject of salvation than a crowd of sailors about to embark on a voyage, not knowing if they will return? What better platform from which to deliver an exhortation based on the Book of Jonah than a pulpit shaped like the bow of a ship, which would make the congregation feel that even on dry land they are in the midst of the sea?

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That same intimate connection between the theme and the setting can be found in

Evelio Rosero's novel *Los almuerzos*[2] (Lunches), and explains, in part, the effect of completeness and finality that this work produces. What better setting for the despair and loneliness of modern man than a straying parish, removed from its mission? If the salt is spoiled... if those who should serve as guides are themselves misguided, where can one turn? Where better to place the forgetting of the Gospel than in a parish that justifies its existence by distributing lunches to the neediest? That evangelical practice is confused with mercy, thus understood, is something that reveals, under an appearance of piety, the depth of forgetfulness and lack of missionary commitment. This statement may sound shocking and paradoxical because what could be more in keeping with the essence of the Gospel than to clothe the naked and feed the hungry? But is it not also written that man does not live by bread alone?

Los Almuerzos portrays life in a parish in Bogotá where the priest has decided to organize, in addition to daily mass—the spiritual bread that is the reason for his ministry—lunches for the homeless population. Every day of the week, except Fridays, when the priest and parish workers have lunch together, and Saturdays and Sundays, which are "consecrated to God," a meal is served at noon to the homeless in the area: to the gamines on Mondays, to the blind on Tuesdays, to the prostitutes on Wednesdays, and to the homeless elderly on Thursdays. The burden of this extra work, which is excessive for the resources of a small parish, has been mercilessly placed on the cooks and the altar boy. Three elderly women, known collectively as the Lilias, are in charge of preparing the numerous lunches, and a hunchbacked boy named Tancredo, nominally the altar boy, has been put in charge of almost everything else: keeping the dining room clean and sparkling, going out into the streets to summon the

[2] See previous note.

hungry, attending to the homeless who respond to the call, and then removing the stragglers who refuse to leave the premises. The sacristan, Celeste Machado, is responsible for collecting payments for Masses and arranging everything necessary for the celebration of Masses in general, including collecting alms, which he does himself. His goddaughter, Sabina Cruz, seems to take care of correspondence and reception. Finally, Juan Pablo Almida, the parish priest, is responsible, in accordance with his ministry, for saying Mass; but an increasing portion of his time, energy, and interest are absorbed by the work of mercy he has undertaken. Free lunches could not be distributed if the money to finance them were not obtained, which he has managed to do. But the sums of money coming into the parish, and probably also their origin, trigger gossip among the other parish priests. Father Almida is enraged and cries out to heaven against the infamous slander of his peers, which he attributes to envy. However, under pressure, to whom does he run to justify himself? Not to the bishop or any ecclesiastical authority, as one might expect, but to Don Justiniano, the unscrupulous potentate who provides most of the money and who, one guesses, has become the priest's patron.

Let us return once again to Moby Dick. If we take Christianity seriously, as Herman Melville does, its greatness lies in the fact that it tackles head-on the problem of human salvation. In no other context is the term “problem” more appropriate, because it is a truly pressing and unresolved issue. The dangers that threaten man, and above all his soul, are greater than the storms, waves, winds, or terrible whales described in Moby Dick and the Book of Jonah. It is easier to be lost than to be saved, and the risks for a priest are no less because of his ministry. According to the image of Father Mapple in his sermon, God holds all men with a heavy hand, but he makes his

ministers feel the weight of both hands. He says this when speaking of Jonah, a man whom God entrusted with the mission of defending justice; that is, whom he literally bent under the yoke of an impossible burden: he had to speak of what was right in a crooked world; he had to be the lamp that remains upright on a ship tilted and shaken by the storm; he had to defend the oppressed against corrupt rulers and judges; he had to work for the salvation of souls in a world that believed only in the existence of the body. Jonah could not bear such a burden: that is why he fled to Tarshish, as far away as possible from his native Syria and Nineveh, the city where he was called to prophesy. For who would listen to him in that self-assured city, so large that it took a man three days to walk across it? The city's magistrates would surely have mocked him. So, Jonah decided to flee. He boarded the first ship he found, without haggling over the price of the ticket, just to get as far away as possible from the mission he had been entrusted with. His goal was to reach Tarshish, an ancient commercial metropolis located in what is now southern Spain, on the other side of the world from Nineveh, so that he too could bow down before the false idol of money.

By evoking the story of Jonah, Father Mapple hints at the drama unfolding in his own soul. His parishioners would suspect that he too was tempted to abandon his mission; that he too once felt himself at the bottom of the ocean, hopeless, with seaweed tangled in his hair, in the dark solitude of a whale's belly. In fact, this is precisely how his situation is described at the moment he is about to deliver his sermon: “He paused a little; then kneeling in the pulpit’s bows, folded his large brown hands across his chest, uplifted his closed eyes, and offered a prayer so deeply devout that he seemed kneeling and praying at the bottom of the sea.” When Father Mapple reads to the parishioners the hymn uttered by Jonah at the bottom of the sea, it is as if he were

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making his own prayer audible.

In Evelio Rosero's novel *Los almuerzos*, the burden of the spiritual calling and the flight from it are presented in almost the same terms. We see Father Almida literally fleeing the parish in the company of the sacristan, both wrapped in their raincoats, through the rain and storm that has broken out over them, just as they hurry to meet Don Justiniano, the man who represents the antithesis of his mission. The significance of this flight is illuminated by the contrast it offers with the attitude of Father San José Matamoros, who has offered to replace him. Although the substitute priest is older and weaker than the one in charge, he has the courage to take his commitment beyond mere words. He takes his task so seriously that at the end of each Mass he is seen overwhelmed and on the verge of collapse:

> Exhausted—as Tancredo had never seen an officiant at the end of Mass—reverend San José Matamoros gave his trembling blessing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then entered the sacristy, almost pushing himself along; he looked that tired.

A parallel could be drawn between the infinite weariness of Father San José Matamoros after devoting all his energy to Mass, and the unspeakable exhaustion of Tancredo, the acolyte, dealing with the apathetic and insubordinate crowd attending the lunches. He must endure their insults, impatience, and anger; he must carry them when they pretend to be asleep or dead; he must uncover their tricks to stay in the enclosure; he must expose them by taking off their worn-out shoes, tickling them, and pinching their dirty, slippery soles. Father Matamoros has more years, experience, and wisdom than his acolyte, but his task is no less burdensome than that of the young hunchback; in fact, it is much more overwhelming, because caring for souls is infinitely

harder than caring for the well-being of bodies. Father Matamoros offers bread that no one is interested in, even though it is more valuable and necessary than the bread Father Almida has entrusted him to distribute to Tancredo. That Father Matamoros manages, despite all, to capture the attention of the congregation and move them to tears is a feat that undoubtedly allows us to appreciate the magnitude of his dedication and, consequently, the extent of his fatigue.

Father Almida's replacement, Father San José Matamoros, has an affable character and aspirations that are completely different from those of his predecessor, which is why he immediately wins the sympathy of the parish workers. He is not an imposing figure and does not even look like a real priest, but rather a plucked bird, a poor thing, a madman of God. But it soon becomes clear that he sincerely cares for souls and listens genuinely and attentively to those around him. Moreover, although he does not have Father Almida's thunderous voice, he uses his own to better effect: he shares fraternally with the parish workers and sings Mass beautifully and with true inspiration. For the first time in a long time, tongues of fire descend during the celebration of the Eucharist, and the word of the Gospel makes not only the parishioners and the volunteer ladies who form the civic association tremble with enthusiasm, but also the weary workers of the parish. The Lilias, the old cooks, listen to him spellbound, and Tancredo, the young hunchback, has resumed the role of acolyte, from which he had withdrawn:

> "… after Tancredo finished reading [the Gospel], three or four eternal minutes passed before Saint Joseph rose and went to the pulpit to begin his sermon. A sermon that had little or nothing to do with the Gospel—which Gospel? Matthew, Luke, Mark, John? His reading was undone by heaven, but how could

> it not be, Tancredo shouted, if it was a sung sermon, the revived mass of those who had already died. It was also an unusual sermon because of its brevity, full of grace, which seemed to Tancredo more like a sung poem than a sermon in the true sense of the word, but a prayer at the end of the road, he thought, a prayer for the love of men, without race or creed, the only way, still scorned, that Christ proposed to humanity to reach heaven as if stretching out their hands. It was the mass of transparency. When the parishioners finished saying the Lord's Prayer, they waited hopefully for Matamoros to repeat it in song, as he had repeated the Gloria and the Creed, and so it happened, to everyone's delight: he sung exquisitely in Latin the Pater noster, qui es in caelis: sanctifecétur nomen tuum; advéniat regnum tuum; fiat volúntas tua, sicut in caelo, ei in terra…he lifted them up to the heavens. But from the heavens they fell to earth, bewildered, at the moment of the communion ritual. Father San José approached the line of faithful waiting and, with the gesture of a concerned man of flesh and blood, asked the acolyte for help in holding the golden chalice with the shining body of Christ. The communicants were terrified by the trembling of his hands. On more than one occasion, they feared that the hosts would slip from his fingers. The communicants chose to attribute the trembling to the same emotion that overwhelmed them, the fullness of that sung music that made the Mass an apotheosis of peace. They waited in suspense to hear him finish singing the Prayer after Communion, and when the last opportunity to respond and say goodbye finally came, they all sang Amen as one. Hearts were heard.

So much, then, for a broad outline of the story told in *Los Almuerzos*. We cannot

expect the exposition of an idea, but from the description of the setting, the actions in which the characters become entangled, and the fears and hesitations of the acolyte, a drama, an inner conflict, is gradually revealed. Tancredo is committed to his faith; he is the acolyte (from the Greek *akoulythos*, "the follower"), but he has no one to follow, no one to imitate. Through his eyes, we gradually delve into the closed darkness that surrounds him. We learn about Father Almida's true character through Tancredo's silent complaint that the priest has not kept his promise to support him in continuing his studies; we become acquainted with the sacristan Celeste Machado through the cold and malicious interrogations he subjects the hunchback to, and by the secret signals he must use to evade his surveillance and arrange his meetings with Sabina Cruz; we get to know the destitute population that attends the lunches through the patience the hunchback must muster, trying to discern whether they are awake or asleep, whether they are pretending to be dead or simply scheming, so that someone else will bear the burden of their lives. The parish is the whale in whose belly Tancredo drowns, thousands of miles from any human soul, far even from Sabina's soul.

In the *Book of Jonah*, as in the other prophetic books, the author writes to denounce a disturbed social and political order, in which the people do not respect the law, the poorest are abandoned to their fate, and the rich and powerful act with arrogance and indifference. Jonah had not literally been swallowed by a whale, but he felt as if he were drowning in Nineveh. Although the city was enormous and had one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants, he felt alone and separated from humanity. The hearts of men had become hard and insensitive; there was no way to communicate with anyone.

The novel *Los almuerzos* describes a similar scenario. The scale is infinitely smaller, but

the drama is the same. Not a single true word comes from the spiritual leaders of the parish: only empty formulas, repetitive, mechanical gestures. The parish priest utters words of feigned piety, which instead of consoling, reveal his complicity with the sacristan's machinations, as he tightens his grip on the parish workers. The sacristan is driven by a desire to trample on others, but his offensive is cloaked in pious language. According to him—following a familiar script—very little is being done; it is necessary to be more ambitious; it is necessary to get the weary homeless people who attend the lunches to listen with interest to the word of God. It is necessary to show tangible results. The sacristan Machado raises the bar that others must reach, but not to make them better, but to strike and humiliate them.

For the oppressed to rebel, it is not enough for their situation to be bad; it must also be getting worse. In the small setting in which the story of *Los almuerzos* unfolds, several changes are looming: for the parish priest, due to pressure from Don Justiniano and the other priests, the possibility of losing the source of funding for his main activity; for Tancredo, the acolyte, the imminence of suffering more despotic and meticulous supervision by the sacristan. Celeste Machado's “improvement plans” suggest that everything will be worse, much more inhumane and absurd than before. Work will double in the name of Christian sacrifice; mistreatment disguised as correction will worsen; hypocrisy will become more blatant. The situation will become unbearable, and a violent outcome will be almost inevitable.

It was under these circumstances that Father San José Matamoros arrived. His simple gestures of humanity seemed to the parish workers to be something prodigious, unreal, implausible. Here was a committed priest who took his role seriously and devoted himself to his mission to the utmost of his strength! The parish workers could

hardly believe it:

> The three Lilias were the first to react, tiptoeing after Matamoros, whom they found without his sacred vestments, panting, sitting in the only chair in the sacristy, next to the telephone, surrounded by angels and apostles, wiping his forehead with a towel. They approached him as if they feared he did not exist and also as if they could not believe he existed, and they surrounded him, carefully, as if he were an apparition.

The novel does not reveal Father Matamoros' words to the reader, nor can it show him the song with which he moved souls, or the sound of his voice. It does not even tell him which passages from the Gospel the priest commented on in his homily. San José Matamoros can only be known through what he inspires in others. He represents a light of hope in the midst of darkness. With his arrival at the parish, the old cooks regain their sense of value and dignity. They are seen moving nimbly and happily, as if they had regained their youth. They pour wine and celebrate inspiration and enthusiasm. At the same time, the altar boy, who had been removed from his duties and remained oppressed by overwhelming and inhuman work, now stands tall and content with himself; the girl who hid, ashamed of her sexuality, fearing the inquisitive gaze of her godfather, now gives free rein to her desire and soothes her soul. Plainchant, which had been expelled by the sacristan's deafness and the priest's bureaucratic indifference, resounds once again in the church choir and brings joy to all the parishioners. It is no longer a question of intimidation or witch hunts, following the vision of the sacristan Machado, or of precariously feeding hungry bodies, following the aspirations of Father Almida, but of inspiring and walking together, towards goodness, towards self-realization.

Naturally, in the novel, the sense of drama and the nature of the characters are not so obvious. All of this is a reading, an interpretation based on what Tancredo's hatreds and loves, Lilias' steps and whispers, and Sabina Cruz's outbursts of anger suggest. In Tancredo's case, for example, he is initially aware only of his unease, his despair, his lack of a future. He feels that he has betrayed something, but he does not know exactly what. The positive, affirmative presence of Father Matamoros is what brings about the revelation, in him or in the reader. What has tormented Tancredo in relation to Sabina Cruz, with whom he sleeps with and is obsessed with; what he has hated about his mind-numbing job, dealing with the beggar mob that devours all his energy, his entire inner life, his whole being; what has haunted him, day after day, from morning till night, was always the same: the awareness that he has no time or energy for the only thing that truly matters: his fulfillment as a human being. It is from this loss of self, from this absolute wreck, that Father San José Matamoros redeems him, in a simple, human way: singing, talking, drinking, sharing together.

Here, then, is the connection between the theme and the setting. The place that was created as a meeting place and a place of liberation has become a prison. The parish ceased to serve the higher purpose of salvation and care for the souls of the parishioners, to be put at the service of Father Almida's worldly interests. He can no longer pronounce the Word that founded his ministry because he never understood it. He was never anything more than a functionary, a mercenary of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy devoted to his passions, reconciled with the world; a man who, through his attitudes and daily life, never ceases to affirm his intimate conviction that human beings are only bodies. He never understood that man needs more than bread to live, and so he congratulates himself for having turned the parish into a restaurant for the

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homeless. But the height of incomprehension of the cause of the Gospels is represented by his right-hand man, the sacristan Celeste Machado, described in the novel as a foreman who harasses and watches over his subordinates with a cold, inquisitive gaze, devoid of all humanity.

This quick review of the novel serves to show that the parish setting is not merely a backdrop. Its character comes from those who inhabit and animate it, representing once again the roles that confront each other in the human drama of salvation. At times, we get the impression that Leviathan and Behemoth, the legendary monsters from the Book of Job, are emerging from the shadows. At times, it is the creatures of the underworld of Greek mythology that appear. There are the Furies, plotting in silence. There is Sisyphus, futilely rolling a stone to the top of the mountain, only to let it fall again. Beyond, we glimpse, lurking in the shadows, the cold eyes of the Gorgon, freezing the blood of those who gaze upon her.

At first glance, the Lilias appear to be a group of obliging and devoted women, like those who usually surround priests, since they accompany Father Almida, indulge him, pamper him, and follow his every move like docile pets. But from one moment to the next, they change and reveal unexpected facets. The fact that there were three of them and that they spoke and acted as one could have made one think of the witches in Macbeth, sitting around the cauldron, cooking up disastrous events; but one soon senses that they represent higher powers. Their number and the way they are intertwined bring to mind the Furies of Greek mythology, sharing one eye and a single tooth. Sometimes, because of their benevolent attitude and the way they pour wine and rejoice in song, they evoke the Graces. But because of the way they plot in silence and act against the cunning cats and the oppressive powers of the parish, they suggest

the Fates.

These associations are not forced, but rather evoked in some way by the novel. The Lilias acolytate (again that verb of Greek origin, *akoloutheo*, which means to follow, accompany, travel with, understand) the desire to drink, sing, share, and celebrate life, present in Father San José Matamoros. Like the Graces of Greek mythology, they invite us to transport ourselves to a time when men offered their riches and their lives for causes they considered beautiful, and when the gods generously distributed intelligence and inspiration, honor, and moral sense among men; a time when commerce was practiced, but society was not governed by economic calculation, but by generosity, and when the joy of making a profit was only a foretaste of the ecstasy of giving; a time when the world overflowed with youth and generosity and there was no need to save for times of scarcity.

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But if we consider the other image associated with the Lilias, that of the Fates, we are

transported to a time when nothing anymore is free, and when the cheerful girls who once danced hand in hand now act as stooped servants of the underworld. They languish by the fire, preparing pitiful meals that enslave those who prepare them without comforting those who receive them. They are the embodiment of absurd work and the meaningless accumulation of wealth. Soon they will rebel and, like the Fates, conspire in silence to punish the stupidity and insensitivity of their oppressors.

The departure of the two main figures of the parish is enough for the place to become what it never was: Mount Tabor, where the transfiguration of man takes place, and where love once again illuminates everything. Thanks to the arrival of Father José Matamoros and the providential departure of the former leaders of the parish, the lovers embrace again under the altar, and for a moment, the parishioners attending Mass feel the drunkenness and madness of the divine.

The novel *Los almuerzos* describes with remarkable economy a drama that is universal and timeless: the drama of stupidity and ambition hijacking life and parasitizing institutions that were once created to serve progress and human fraternity. But at the same time, it hints at the possibility of restoration, thanks to the stubborn persistence of humanity and love. The novel does not reveal what the future holds for the parish it portrays. It only shows, through the ambiguous triad of the Lilias, a fabric woven by the Fates that is at the same time a fortunate discovery by the Graces.

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