A priest's tale

by Christopher Elwood in the August 14, 2002 issue

The Morebath whose voices are chronicled in Eamon Duffy's narrative is a remote and tiny sheep farming community in England's West Country. An unexceptional village, its very ordinariness seems to be chief among the charms that drew the author's attention--that and the fact that a remarkable priest served the community for a long time, in interesting times, and took good notes. The priest, Sir Christopher Trychay, maintained the church account book from his arrival in 1520 until his death in 1574, providing for posterity detailed information on the parish's activities, along with his distinctive commentary, as the community lived through the tumult of reformation unleashed by Henry VIII and his heirs.

These records are the principal basis for the story this book tells. Since Sir Christopher's personality profoundly shapes the documentary trail, the Morebath we meet in Duffy's reconstruction is very much the parish of the priest's own experience and imagination. It is his voice, rather than the voices of his parishioners, that comes through most clearly in this lively telling of Morebath's 16th-century history.

Duffy, president of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and a self-described cradle Catholic, may have a penchant for slightly misleading book titles. His highly regarded *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) was more centrally concerned with the shape of traditional Catholicism in 15th-century England than with the iconoclasm of the 16th century implied by the title. But though his study of Morebath focuses on a single voice, Duffy does a marvelous job of allowing his readers to hear through this medium a community constituting itself in its religious practices. He shows us that the church activities so carefully recorded by the priest--the pious bequests, mostly in service of the cult of saints, and the unusual means of caring for and reporting on the church's sheep (a significant source of income for the parish)--were exercises in religious devotion that knit the community together as a sacral body. The example of Morebath tends to support the thesis of Duffy's earlier writing: far from a degenerate faith that called for radical reforming measures, the popular Catholicism of medieval Britain was a vital religion whose practitioners were loathe to see it taken apart.

But taken apart it was, first under Henry VIII and then more insistently by two of the three children who succeeded him. With the removal of altars, crucifixes and saints' images, the suppression of devotion to Mary and the saints, the confiscation of banners and vestments, the elimination of the mass and praying for the dead, and the outlawing of traditional means of parish fund raising, Morebath's religion was changed beyond recognition.

Did Sir Christopher or his parishioners object to these changes? One assumes so, especially in light of the priest's celebration of the return of Catholic worship and traditional parish arrangements during the brief reign of Queen Mary. However, the documentary record displays few voices of complaint. In fact, the parish was a model of conformity to the injunctions about religion handed down by representatives of the crown. This habit of obedience makes all the more surprising Duffy's discovery that Morebath's patience finally snapped. It sent several of its young men to join the ill-fated Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549, some of whom likely died in the violent conclusion to the anti-Protestant uprising.

In time Morebath and its priest would have to make a kind of peace with the forms of Protestantism that were to prevail in the late 16th century. By the end of Sir Christopher's life the parish was discernibly Protestant, a testimony to the success of the religious settlement under Queen Elizabeth and a temporary conclusion to a long religious revolution. And yet, through its priest, one glimpses in Morebath a complex mixture of acceptance of a new order and a longing for the past: even under Elizabeth, Sir Christopher still christened at least two children with the name Sidwell--the local saint whose cult he championed from his first years in the parish.

The story Duffy constructs is a compelling account, at a local level, of how a revolution was experienced by its discontents. His sympathies are clearly on the side of those who lost the war between traditional English religion and a disenchanting and secularizing Protestantism. At times those sympathies seem to lead to a stretching of the meager source material in order to reveal feelings that are, finally, beyond the historian's grasp. It may be that the conservatism of Morebath's priest masked a greater diversity of feeling in his parish; the voices of Morebath may not have coincided exactly with their priest's voice. But we have only Sir Christopher to tell us of the people he served for over 50 years. As Duffy himself well knows, much of the past remains hidden from us. What he does help us to see vividly is a local religion incarnated in a servant of the church, one whose faith was anchored less in doctrine or ideology than in loyalty to a place and its people.