

POETRY AND FAITH IN PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA'S *KITCHEN HYMNS*

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Poet and peace-builder Pádraig Ó Tuama invites us into the everyday sacred. Through poetry as prayer, questions without answers, thresholds that teach stillness, and kitchen liturgy, we learn to listen, pay attention, and discover God in ordinary life.

1. **God Between the Lines: Poetry, Prayer, and the Places We Begin** (September 14)

Poetry can hold our questions about God without rushing to answer them.

2. **Do You Believe in God? And Other Questions Worth Answering Slowly** (September 21)

In a world that demands quick answers, Ó Tuama invites us to sit with life's deepest questions—long enough to hear what they're really asking.

3. **In a Garden by a Gate: The Sacred Work of Standing Still** (September 28)

A journey into the spaces between—waiting, watching, and discovering God in small, overlooked places.

4. **Kitchen Hymns: The Liturgy of Kettles, Cups, and Quiet Blessings** (October 5)

In Ó Tuama's world, even making tea can be a prayer. Daily life becomes liturgy when we pay attention.

5. **The Prophetic Voice of Poetry** (October 12)

Discover how poetry unites spirituality and justice, calling us into deeper compassion.

This year's theme

Building community — not just talks about it, but *practicing* it - through reflection, poetry, shared meals, outreach.

TALK 1

GOD BETWEEN THE LINES: POETRY, PRAYER, AND THE PLACES WE BEGIN

1. Pádraig Ó Tuama

- 1.1. Poet, theologian, peacemaker from Ireland.
- 1.2. Big question he asks: *How can language bring us closer to each other?*
- 1.3. Former leader of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland — living out reconciliation and community every day.
- 1.4. His writing explores belonging, doubt, and courage
- 1.5. He reminds us that poems can be a practice of community.
- 1.6. He is known as host of *Poetry Unbound* — showing how a few lines can open doors into reflection and connection.
- 1.7. His life and work remind us that community is built through the ordinary.

2. Explanation of the title *Kitchen Hymns*

“Old kitchen hymns that you find in rural places like Donegal. [...] It’s a loose term for hymnodies that were never allowed to be sung in a chapel, because they weren’t in Latin. They were songs, holy songs, sung in the kitchen, sung at home, probably composed by women, though nobody knows who they’re composed by. The point of view of many of these old hymns is that of a woman who’s holding a son of hers,

- malleability to time
- the mix of both joy and grief.
- Marian Catholic approach,
- all the circumstances of sorrow that a parent goes through.
- Shakespeare “give sorrow words.”¹

“What do I say in my kitchen? What happens there, and what happens in places that wouldn’t be allowed in a chapel? What’s a poetic for that? What’s a language for that? What’s a risk for that? That’s at the heart of the book”.

3. O Tuama on belief:

“How do we engage with the sacred when religious language has been used to control, coerce, and erase alternate spiritualities, when history is littered with traumas enacted by institutionalized religion?”²

“I’m not a person of belief, even though I love the question of God. It depends what it is you want to do with your belief. Plenty of people believe in God, and they use that as the beginning point for curiosity about the world. Whereas other people have a belief in a religious point of view, and they use that to convince and to recruit and to market. Often by denigrating other systems of moral thinking and action, and seeking to alienate people from their cultural background. That’s the history of missionaries, isn’t it?

a. _____

¹ Millar 3

² Millar 1

To go elsewhere, believing that you have an answer to a question that you refuse to imagine people are already asking. Questions about origin, source, purpose, meaning, love, community, right action.”³

“Well, my guess is that there’s already a hundred different ways of thinking about belief. I’m interrogating and pushing and rejecting certain approaches to that verb that have been particularly manipulative, and particularly ideological or imperial.”⁴

a.

³ Kate Millar’s interview of Pádraig Ó Tuama, “[Beyond the “Burden of Belief”: Pádraig Ó Tuama on Religious Trauma, Eros, and Poetry as Prayer](#)”, 5f.

⁴ Millar 6.

Do You Believe in God?

I don't believe in God, I said, and she said, Oh?
Somehow I thought you'd managed to keep that going
even though I haven't. She asked if I'd told others.

Yes, I said, I have. I mean, it's not like I'm
saying I Know About What Is. It's just that the burden
of belief isn't on me anymore. God, it feels much freer.

I believe I'm in the room next to belief. I hear
the sounds of prayers coming through the walls. I like
the smell of incense. And the sound of fabric rustling fabric
as the people stand or kneel. Sometimes I can tell
the text by the intonation of the reader. I mutter
the responses underneath my breath. Lift up your hearts.

And do you? she asked, Lift up your heart?

Yes, I said, I do, but I don't know to who.

Whom, she said. Let's get started on the soup.

Pádraig Ó Tuama

“DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?”. POETIC ANALYSIS

Line by line analysis

4. “I don't believe in God, I said, and she said, Oh?”

- 4.1.** The poem opens in direct speech, dropping us into an intimate exchange. The honesty is blunt, while her response — “Oh?” — is gentle, surprised but not condemning.

5. “Somehow I thought you'd managed to keep that going / even though I haven't.”

- 5.1.** Her admission mirrors his — a recognition of shared loss of faith. The phrase “keep that going” makes belief sound like an effortful practice, something sustained rather than automatic.

6. “She asked if I'd told others.”

- 6.1.** Belief or doubt is not only personal; it is communal.

7. “Yes, I said, I have. I mean, it's not like I'm / saying I Know About What Is.”

- 7.1.** He clarifies: rejecting belief is not claiming certainty about reality.
7.2. The capitalized “Know About What Is” signals philosophical weight, mocking the idea of absolute knowledge.

8. “It's just that the burden / of belief isn't on me anymore. God, it feels much freer.”

- 8.1.** Belief is framed as a *burden*, something heavy and demanding. Letting it go feels liberating.
8.2. Ironically, he uses the exclamation “God” . This shows that although belief is questioned, God remains in the picture.

9. “I believe I'm in the room next to belief.”

- 9.1.** A central metaphor: he is not within belief, but adjacent.
9.2. Still close enough to feel its warmth and echoes.
9.3. This suggests belonging as more fundamental than belief.

10. “I hear the sounds of prayers coming through the walls. I like / the smell of incense. And the sound of fabric rustling fabric / as the people stand or kneel.”

- 10.1.** Sensory detail anchors the metaphor: hearing, smelling, touching ritual.
10.2. Though outside, he participates through perception.
10.3. The sensory aspects of rituals is more powerful than belief as a form of knowledge. It is not something we do with the mind but with the body.

11. “Sometimes I can tell / the text by the intonation of the reader. I mutter / the responses underneath my breath. Lift up your hearts.”

- 11.1.** Worship is embodied - muscle memory persists – as if the body knew better.
11.2. “Lift up your hearts” is spoken softly, not abandoned.

12. “And do you? she asked, Lift up your heart?”

- 12.1.** The conversation pivots. The question reframes belief from intellectual assent to embodied practice: not “do you believe?” but “do you lift up your heart?”

13. “**Yes, I said, I do, but I don't know to who.**”

- 13.1. He can worship (lifting the heart) without needing to feel he has to be certain about God.
- 13.2. Relying on the the bodily aspect of faith seems to work more than ‘belief’.

14. “**Whom, she said. Let's get started on the soup.**”

- 14.1. The correction “Whom” is humorous and humanizing grounding lofty questions in grammar.
- 14.2. Ending with soup brings faith to its real location: not the mind but the body, not intellectual disquisitions but the breaking of the bread.

Observations

15. Language and form

- 15.1. **Conversational tone:** Written like dialogue, it mimics the back-and-forth of ordinary conversation, grounding abstract questions in lived intimacy.
- 15.2. **Everyday detail:** Soup, fabric rustling, the smell of incense — ordinary and sacred intertwine, showing how doubt and ritual coexist in embodied life.
- 15.3. **Syntax of uncertainty:** Phrases like “I don’t know to who” capture the honesty of doubt without cynicism. The speaker resists rigid definitions, instead embracing openness.

16. Images and symbols

- 16.1. **The room next to belief:** A powerful metaphor: community and ritual can sustain faith even those outside of certainty.
- 16.2. **Lift up your hearts:** A liturgical phrase repurposed. The speaker affirms the practice, even without clarity about its recipient. Ritual itself can be an act of belonging.
- 16.3. **Soup at the end:** Shift from theological debate to shared, embodied life. Making soup becomes as holy as worship.

17. Suggestions

- 17.1. *Faith* might not be the same as *belief*
- 17.2. *Faith* might be more akin to *belonging*
- 17.3. We think it is about knowledge. Role of the *body* and of *community*.

Questions

- 18. Have you ever felt “in the room next to belief”: close to faith or belonging, but constrained by ‘belief’?
- 19. The speaker still hears prayers, smells incense, mutters responses. What do these sensory memories suggest about the power of common worship?
- 20. Does belonging to a community of practice (prayer, meals, rituals) require shared belief?
- 21. How might this poem expand our understanding of faith?

THE UPPER ROOM - THURSDAYS BOOK READING

Praying, breaking bread, reading, and reflecting — a space to grow in fellowship and faith.

Borders and Belonging.
The Book of Ruth: A Story for Our Times
by Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan

In a world anxious about borders and strangers, Ó Tuama's poetic reading of the Book of Ruth invites us to move beyond suspicion and scapegoating to a society where belonging is reimagined.

Thursdays 6:45-8:15 pm

September 18

September 25

October 2

October 9

In person only.

Registration required

