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Exploring What it Means to be a Catholic in Ireland Today

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Exploring what it means to be a Catholic in Ireland today

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RITE AND REASON:We should not write the epitaph of the Catholic Church in Ireland without trying to evaluate what exactly it embodies

SOME TIME ago, John Littleton and I decided that the next step in our attempts to map the evolution of contemporary Irish Catholicism would be to get people to share their experience of what being Catholic means to them, how it shaped their thinking, and enriched or impoverished their lives.

It was no easy task to get 22 individuals from various walks of Irish life to commit to such a task. For many, Catholicism was something they took for granted, something they were not accustomed to thinking about in any profound manner. They had been born into the Catholic faith, were introduced to its rituals and practices and then either stayed within the fold or left.

So what are the main characteristics of this new book? Well, our desire was to get as broad a cross-section of opinion as possible, an ambition we achieved reasonably well. The largest single group of contributors consists of priests, who, not surprisingly, have a particular interest in the topic.

Similarly, journalists feature prominently, but again these are people who are accustomed to putting forward opinions in written and oral form. We were acutely conscious of gender balance, but unfortunately did not quite manage an equal divide on this occasion. However, the women contributors display great honesty and passion and some raise serious questions about how they feel at times disenfranchised within the institutional church and alienated by a patriarchal hierarchy.

For example, the poet and writer Mary O'Donnell, in a contribution that mirrors the opinions of other contributors, both male and female, takes issue with the church's "undimmed interference in the biological lives of women, its obsession with human sexuality, its inability to accommodate the views of adults whose approach to life was not an exact match of the official template". Yet she also feels that a religious imagination is intimately connected to her sense of self as writer/artist.

In the current atmosphere, with the horrific revelations of the Ryan report fresh in our minds, and the findings of the investigation into the handling of clerical sex abuse in the Dublin archdiocese about to be made public, it is clearly not an easy time to be a Catholic in Ireland.

One might therefore expect a book like this to be tinged with pessimism and bitterness. However, this is not the case.

Even someone like Colm O'Gorman, the victim of horrific abuse at the hands of Fr Seán Fortune, still remembers the comfort of seeing the Sacred Heart picture in the kitchen of his home, with the "flickering red light beneath the image of Christ, who exposed his heart surrounded by thorns, a symbol of divine love for humanity".

Problems with aspects of church teaching do not prevent many from appreciating the beauty of its ceremonies and architecture and the consolation offered by its message of unconditional love for God and one's neighbour. *Irish Catholic* editor Garry O'Sullivan sums up his approach in the following manner: "Being a Catholic means being a liberal, a conservative, a progressive, a traditionalist, a heathen, a Jew and a Greek."

Former editor of *The Irish Times* Conor Brady acknowledges his love for "the immense variety of spiritual richness that Catholicism offers", while Fianna Fáil TD Mary O'Rourke finds huge solace every time she contemplates the beatitudes.

Mark Patrick Hederman, abbot of Glenstal Abbey, hopes that the Holy Spirit may "change the church from being the fragmented, self-opinionated, thick-headed, sexist, male-dominated organisation", to one day become "the transparent image of the God it was meant to be serving".

It is important that Irish society comes to grips with the vast consequences the decline of the power of the Catholic Church brings in its wake. We should not write its epitaph without first trying to evaluate what exactly it embodies.

Hopefully this book will go some way towards doing just that.

Eamon Maher, director, Franco-Irish studies centre in Tallaght IT, is co-editor with John Littleton of *What Being Catholic Means to Me* (Columba Press, €14.95)

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