Eamon Maher on Jean Sullivan

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To mark our anniversary, we have invited 50 Catholics to choose a person from the past 175 years whose life has been a personal inspiration to them and an example of their faith at its best to the priesthood: he was ordained in 1938.

While working in Rennes, he became very involved in cultural activities, but would not publish the first of his 13 novels, Le Voyage Intérieur, until 1958, when he was 45 years old. Sullivan was highly critical of the Church's preoccupation with power and prestige and its narrow, legalistic interpretation of the Gospel, which he thought was a betrayal of Christ's call for interior rebirth and freedom.

In his spiritual journal, Morning Light, he reflects: "I see the Church detaching its members from structures of profit, conventional security, and mythologies in order to make them spiritual nomads, capable of commitment without illusion, always ready to absolve themselves in order to go somewhere else, straining for the impossible and necessary."

His characters, many of whom are based on people he knew in real life, tend to live on the margins of society – tramps, drug addicts, rebel priests, misfits of all types – and seem to possess more satisfactory answers to the questions that life throws at them than most of those living at the centre.

I translated Sullivan's moving memoir describing the death of his mother, Anticipate Every Goodbye, into English; it has helped me at times of personal bereavement. "Life ... is about reducing yourself to zero, living in a new and more authentic way."

Killed in a freak hit-and-run accident in February 1980, Sullivan's prophetic voice continues to resonate in his writings.

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