Eamon Maher on Jean Sullivan

Eamon Maher
Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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The priest-novelist Jean Sulivan may not be as well known as François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos, but he deserves a place among the great French Catholic writers of the twentieth century.

Born into a Breton farming family in 1913, he lost his father in the trenches of the First World War and then had to endure the remarriage of his pious mother, to whom he was extremely devoted. It may have been the strong, simple faith of his mother that prompted Sulivan’s vocation 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. Sulivan 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 absent 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 Sulivan’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, Sulivan’s prophetic voice continues to resonate in his writings.

Eamon Maher is director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies, based in Dublin.