I would never leave, even if they should try to kick me out. That may be as much Irish pigheadedness as genuine faith. But I have lots of friends and family who already have left or who often threaten to leave the Catholic Church. This breaks my heart. With some 30 million former Catholics in the United States alone, I meet lots of them along the way—on planes and trains, at family wakes and weddings. My first instinct always is to try to convince them, as Michael Leach advises, that instead of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” they might reconsider and recognize that “The baby [Catholic faith] is precious, it’s real, it never grows old, can still give joy, peace, and assurance, and it’s not dependent on people.” Now I also have a great book for them to read. Why Stay Catholic? might well convince exiles to return and the wavering to remain.

In the spirit of James Joyce’s definition of catholic as “here comes everybody,” Leach makes a powerful argument for a big-tent Catholicism: “there is room in the church for everyone, or there is room for no one...for those who save their money for a pilgrimage to Medjugorje and for those who blow it at Vegas, for sinners, saints, and fools.” In that light, I thank God with renewed confidence for my own welcome.

The author—publisher emeritus and editor at large of Orbis Books—divides this fun book into three sections, around ideas, people and places that epitomize Catholicism. The ideas rise up afresh out of “the great deposit of faith”; but this “is not a limited checking account; it’s a trust fund that increases and multiplies.” His key conviction, repeated often throughout, is God’s unconditional love for every person. His central Scripture text is Rom 8:38-39, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The “People” section has stories of some persons well known to all and others better known to Leach who incarnate the Catholic faith. Many of his heroes are mine as well: Thea Bowman, Miriam Therese Winter, Dorothy Day, Bishop Ray Lucker, Andrew Greeley and now the author’s spouse, Vickie (for battling illness with faith and courage). Under “Places,” where the word gets made flesh again, he reviews parishes (like Old St. Pat’s, Chicago), schools, hospitals, monasteries, Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, among others.
In my view, the two best reasons for staying Catholic, as the book stresses, are the twin principles of incarnation and sacramentality. Of course, Catholicism is incarnational in its focus on Jesus. Leach is convinced that the Jesus event and his paschal mystery is not about a God who needed to be appeased for our sins but one who came looking for us out of love. Catholicism is particularly incarnational, however, in that it encourages people to enflesh their faith, to realize it in their lives, far beyond the purely confessional. This is why he emphasizes people and places who concretize it. And even the ideas that he highlights all lead to practices of one kind or another; Catholic Christian faith must get done “on earth as in heaven.”

The other side of the incarnational coin is the sacramental nature of Catholic faith. Again, this emphasis reaches a climax in the seven great liturgical sacraments that we celebrate in church, but these arise from and flow back into the sacramentality of the ordinary and everyday of life. Because “God is everywhere,” God looks for us and we respond through our lives in the world. In the words of St. Augustine, “If you have an eye for it, the world itself is sacramental.” It is the sacramentality of Catholic faith that makes it so humane, so life-giving. “Catholicism seen through the eye of a needle is a religion of rules and regulations. Seen with the sacramental imagination, it is a unique take on life, a holy vision, a way of seeing the chosen part of things.”

These twin principles—the incarnational and sacramental—are what make Catholicism most worthwhile, why anyone can well stay, regardless of disappointments and complaints and the scandals that beset the church. Indeed, these very principles lend Catholic faith its rich spiritualities; “When it comes to spirituality, “the author writes, “the Catholic Church is a Garden of Eden.”

These principles also explain why we love to tell the stories of faith, old and new, and why Catholics can often have a little more fun. “Catholics like to get together and eat cholesterol and drink beer and have fun.” This book itself oozes with the incarnational and sacramental, providing many laughs and a few tears while reading it. I learned, for instance, that “Americans trust angels ten times more than they do their congressmen. That makes sense.”

Meanwhile, Leach pulls no punches when it comes to the church’s shortcomings; his book is anything but a whitewash. In fact, it is brutally honest. Yet it is also long on hope, perhaps the theological virtue most needed now. He is convinced, for example, that the great controversies that beset our time concerning ministry (e.g., optional celibacy, women’s ordination) will all be solved in good time, and people will wonder what all the fuss was about. Just like that!

Treat yourself and your friends, whether staunch, wavering, recovering or in exile, to this inspiring book. It forcefully makes the case for staying; it will also “bring the smile back to [your] Catholicism, the kind that comes from deep in your heart.”

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