

FEATURES & OPINION



Bringing brains to the faith

As Australians celebrate their national day an academic tells **Christina Farrell** why the nation's Catholics need to leave behind childhoods of 'guilt and incense'



Picture the scene: the crypt of a historic Sydney church, piles of books and glasses of wine. The hum of polite chit-chat is broken by an opening address and a quiz. A quiz?

Questions: "Is it permitted to confess deliberately to a deaf priest?" "Is an excommunicate obliged to attend Mass?" James Franklin, professor of mathematics at New South Wales University, wanted to get away from the "passive" experience of the usual book launch. He warned his guests up with some simple questions from the *Penny Catechism* (1956) and then hit his invited audience with more elusive Catholic conundrums. How did they respond? "Deaf priest? Of course not. Second one was rather trickier."

Prof Franklin is well known to Australian Catholics, but may be less familiar to Catholics in the old country. His moral casuistry quiz marked the launch of his work, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities*, which looks at how the Catholic view of ethics has played out in his home nation.

While the world's press was salivating over the allegedly anti-Islamic components of Pope Benedict's Regensburg speech this Australian professor was nodding in agreement with what the Holy Father was actually trying to say – that Catholic ethics are fundamentally based on reason.

"I grew up Catholic and have always admired its commitment – much stronger than that of other religions or other varieties of Christianity – to rational thought," he says.

This goes some way to explaining how James Franklin – a brilliant mathematical brain – has spent his academic life combining the purity of mathematics with philosophy and the history of ideas.

Google his work and you'll find some intriguing concepts: "The Formal Sciences Discover the Philosopher's Stone" or "how big is an indivisible?" It's a magician's palette that intertwines mathematical theory with the mercurial essence of what makes us human. For if mathematics is his "day job" Catholicism is Prof Franklin's interesting sideline, though he balks at the idea that this is a hobby. His book, described as "ideal for those who like their religion in small doses", traces the history and impact of Catholicism on Australian national life. He tackles *sola scriptura* – scripture alone – good works and immigration, values in schools and the debate about land rights.

Cardinal George Pell has described it as "a brilliant little book".

What Prof Franklin does most effectively is to place Australian Catholics at the heart of the political and decision-making process. It is time, he argues, for them to move on from remembering childhoods "full of guilt and incense" to recognise their unique contribution to the nation in terms of intellectual integrity and ethical values.

"Irish Australians had some tendency to regard themselves as a persecuted tribe and to think of their religion as a tribal uniform," he says.

"That was not entirely unreasonable for a poor section of society that suffered a certain amount of discrimination. But justice is about other people's rights as well as one's own. Australian Catholics had to learn to give attention to the rights of others: Australian aborigines, refugees, the frail, the aged and the global poor."

He argues that Australian Catholics, who today number almost a quarter of the population, have added a distinct quality to the civilisation of the nation. That includes a

Prof Franklin cites the classic Mabo case of 1992.

"Australian High Court judges with a Catholic background rejected precedent in favour of a deeper principle of equality of justice," he explains. "They concluded that native title to land could not have been extinguished by the British annexation and settlement of eastern Australia." It was a major victory for Aboriginal rights.

Catholic Australian intellectual life has increasingly assimilated itself to the secular zeitgeist. So is its unique selling power being lost? Franklin partly agrees but believes there has been progress.

"It's true that Australian Catholics have not always been able to say what is their unique selling proposition (as the marketers put it) – what distinctive point of view they have to offer. So perforce other voices have tended to drown them out.

"Les Murray is doing a good job through his poetry, certainly. Another is Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia 1996-2001, who brought a calm dignity and commitment to compassion and justice to his ceremonial role. Cardinal Pell, the present Archbishop of Sydney, is widely known in the community and respected for his clear statements of Christian values." The professor was influenced by the great statesman of Australian Catholic history, Patrick O'Farrell, however he has carved his own unique niche, focusing not just on the religious history of a people but on the ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation. His emphasis on the Catholic tradition of ethics based on reason leads him to be scathing of the evangelical trends in Christianity. "The so-called Bible-based evangelical Anglicanism that is strong in Sydney at the moment leads to a one-sided and selective view of what is in the Bible," he says.

He recalls a housemate whom he shared lodgings with during his time as a postgraduate at Warwick University. "He had received advice from his pastor to 'read Romans, then read Romans again' – as opposed, apparently, to allowing Romans to point to the Gospels. That is well on the way to Christianity without Christ. The result is a fundamentalist fixation on 'faith', supposedly in Jesus, without a willingness to listen to what Jesus really said – for example on charity or justice."

Prof Franklin insists that people are missing the bigger picture and that they should "read the Gospels less often but in larger portions". Yet overall he is heartened by the vigorous response of most Australian Catholics to their faith. This reflects not only the distinctive character of Australian Catholicism but also the strong and decisive leadership shown by prelates down under.

Catholics continue in huge numbers to serve the real life of the Church through prayer, family life and charity work. World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney should reflect that commitment with a healthy dose of Antipodean exuberance. But there are lost opportunities too.

"Just as Australia is a good deal more successful in winning cricket series than Nobel prizes, so the Australian Catholic Church has been much more prominent in hospital and primary school work than in universities," he explains.

Higher intellectual Catholic rigour is essential if Catholic Australians are to continue shaping the land of their birth and passing on the faith to future generations. Prof Franklin insists that the Church needs both clarity and strength of purpose.

"Any religion or ideology needs to get its story straight before it can tell that story convincingly to the wider world – including to its own children who want to know what they have inherited," he argues.

commitment to what he describes as “abstract ethical principles over ‘how things have always been done’ or ‘what the majority votes for today’” and a wider international perspective that looks beyond the narrow concerns of the Anglophone world.

“The ‘triumphalism’ of Pius XII’s church had its downside, but it had a clear story that made an impact. An equally clear story of the basics of what Catholics have to offer needs to be got ‘out there’ again.”
The questions of 1956 on deaf priests and excommunicates were the lighter side of a serious commitment to ethical principles that have been thrown out, the professor says, “like the baby with the bathwater”. Philosophy must return to the front line of Catholic life.

To obtain copies of Catholic Values and Australian Realities log on to www.connorcourt.com.au/catalog/productinfo.php/productsid/62

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