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## Book reveals diverse, feisty church in Chicago

by Robert McClory

NCR Today

A new book, which gives a voice to Catholics of many stripes, has arrived in the Advent season, just when the busy-ness of Christmas preparation relegates book-reading to the background for most people. Fortunately, *An Irrepressible Hope: Notes From Chicago Catholics* is short, highly readable and may offer support and reflection, especially for those who find the struggles of current Catholicism depressing.

*An Irrepressible Hope* was conceived when the president of ACTA Publications, Greg Pierce, was chatting with some priests after Cardinal Francis George had submitted his letter of resignation as Chicago archbishop. And though George could be in charge for several more years, everyone was wondering what lay ahead for the archdiocese down the line. Reportedly, Pierce said just what you might expect from a publisher: "Let's write a book!"

But what came about was not the sort of book you might expect. Under the guidance of Pierce and editor Claire Bushey, a swath of Chicago Catholics were asked to submit brief essays on anything the incoming bishop might need to know or, for that matter, anything they would like to say about themselves and their church. A few of the offerings addressed the unknown newcomer head-on and offered specific advice about changes. The majority chose lessons they had learned or recalled anecdotes and interactions with the church: some sad, some joyous, some confusing, many poignant. One clear aim of the publisher was to spotlight the diversity, creativity and quirky feistiness that is a hallmark of Chicago Catholicism. And this the book does, but readers from other sectors of the United States will hear echoes of their own experience of church.

In the interest of full disclosure, I confess that mine is one of the 33 essays in this slim volume. Among the contributors are business professionals, blue-collar workers, students, sisters, priests, parents and grandparents. Ages range from 12 to 87.

Ken Trainor, a journalist, tells of bringing his elderly mother to mass in Oak Park and observing from a front pew "the remarkable parade of humanity" at communion time.

"Something happens each Sunday as this ragtag confederacy of isolates is transformed into a 'people,' the people of God, what Vatican II defined as 'church.' " In the shared experience of communion, he says, "the Spirit inhabits the space until there is no space at all."

Maureen Kelleher, a friend of the Catholic Worker community, talks about her neighbor Daniel, whose brother was shot and killed, and who is now himself awaiting trial in another shooting. The good work parish and city programs do are important, she says. "But all this good work has yet to reach Daniel. Can the church in Chicago extend its role as a peacemaker, so that one day our city will not lead the nation in youth lost to violence? I pray that may happen."

Benedictine Sr. Patricia Crowley recalls the meeting between her mother, a pioneer of lay activism, and Cardinal Francis George: "After a bit I asked my mother if she would like the cardinal to give her a blessing. After a pregnant pause, she said to me, 'Yes, but first I will give him my blessing.' " George deferred to her wishes. The story, Crowley says, "holds for me the seeds of a possible future for our church -- one in which women are recognized for who they are, as the bearers of many blessings for all."

Lauren Ivory, a hospital chaplain, tells of the elderly patient who began to weep when she came with communion.

"He said he had always been a good and faithful Catholic. But he had stopped going to mass two years ago because he was so bothered by the hierarchy's handling of the sexual abuse crisis. He grabbed my hand and cried, 'they took my church away from me.' " Ivory continues: "I am so thankful to this man whose grief exposed to me my own. We found a moment of healing grace together, not surprisingly, by being in communion with one another."

Damian Barta, a social justice activist whose faith had grown dormant, remembers running into Sr. Christina Fuller, the religious education director, at the parish rectory after he finished arrangements for his father's funeral.

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"How come we don't see you at St. Nick's?" she asked.

Damian said he was too unsure of his faith.

"Come on," she responded. "Faith is like a muscle you have to exercise. You have to work at it!"

Those words, he said, "pushed me to take my search for meaning in a new direction. Her example -- this woman is a dynamo involved in so many parish activities -- was one of the main elements compelling me to take that step back to the community."

*An Irrepressible Hope* is available online from ACTA Publications or Amazon.com.

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