Graham Greene is perhaps one of the first novelists that springs to a contemporary mind when Catholic writing and literature is mentioned. A convert to Catholicism, he, like many converts before him including John Henry Cardinal Newman (one of the most famous converts of them all) discovered that writing as a Catholic attracted attentions they had never received before conversion. For years Newman was under a Vatican cloud for some of his writing, and Greene was at the height of his international fame when his highly acclaimed novel The Power and the Glory received a ‘negative judgement’ from the Holy Office (despite Cardinal Montini, later Pope Paul VI, as the Vatican’s pro-Secretary of State for Ordinary Affairs intervening on Greene’s behalf at the time).

The Holy Office, now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, sent a letter to the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Griffin, asking him to exhort Greene “to lend a more constructive tone to his books, from a Catholic point of view”. Cardinal Griffin replied, suggesting that the Holy Office (in effect, Cardinals Pizzardo and Ottaviano) should “understand and excuse this right-thinking convert”. Within three weeks of receipt of Cardinal Griffin’s letter, they did, but, no doubt with some considerable mutterings under their breaths. It took a lot longer to resolve some of the Holy Office’s misunderstandings about some of Newman’s work.

Converting to Catholicism often comes at an unforeseen price, especially for a writer or public figure, unused to an ‘external’ scrutiny of what constitutes a right-thinking Catholic mind and how that translates into a right-thinking Catholic book. This scrutiny, perhaps less stringent now than it once was, nevertheless, raises interesting questions about what makes literature Catholic.

Is the work of Irish novelist Brian Moore, for example, ‘Catholic’ because he was baptised a Catholic and wrote about Catholicism, even though he eventually (and some may say antagonistically in his writing) rejected his faith? Is the work of Evelyn Waugh ‘Catholic’ because he converted to Catholicism and later made a lot of noise about saving the Latin Mass at the time of Vatican II? Is the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins ‘Catholic’ because he was a Jesuit priest? Is Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings ‘Catholic’ because Tolkien was a devout Catholic all his life? Is the writing of Simone Weil ‘Catholic’, even though she never took the final step of actually formally converting to Catholicism? Are Flannery O’Connor’s short stories, mostly set in the Southern Baptist Belt of the US, ‘Catholic’ because she herself was a devout Catholic?

We could pose hundreds of similar (and, some might suggest, banal and simplistic) questions about hundreds of writers over the centuries since the Reformation (the moment from which not everything or everyone in Western society could be unproblematically labelled ‘Catholic’), but to do so puts the emphasis on determining what constitutes ‘Catholicism’ on to those of us posing such questions. But, we don’t answer the question of what is ‘Catholic’ in other areas of our lives like this. What makes us Catholic is not what we say it is – the bits and pieces that suit us for example – but what the Church determines, as a whole through its Magisterium.

For example, Pope John Paul II in his Letter to Artists (1995) talked about the great importance of literature and the arts in human life, quoting from the Vatican II document Gaudium et Spes (No. 62) that artists “seek to probe the true nature of man, his problems and experiences, as he strives to know and perfect himself and the world, to discover his place in history and the universe, to portray his miseries and joys, his needs and strengths, with a view to a better future”.

The literature that seeks to engage with that “better future” from a Catholic perspective, as a literary reflection on times, people and ideas, past, present and future, is perhaps what might usefully begin any discussion on who to include and who to leave out of Catholic Literature. Flannery O’Connor (in opposition somewhat to Cardinals Pizzardo and Ottaviano) broadly described Catholic literature “as a Catholic mind looking into anything”. This is certainly how Cardinal Montini saw Greene’s contribution, and, later, in 1965, as Pope Paul VI, when he and Greene met, he was reported to have said: “Mr Greene, some parts of your book are certain to offend some Catholics, but you should pay no attention to that.”

As this comment, and the overall Graham Greene incident shows, there is often more to Catholic literature than immediately meets the eye from the pages of the book itself. And not all that offends some Catholics necessarily offends Catholicism itself.

Engaging with such literature can, therefore, often be exciting, challenging, and satisfying, not so much...
because of what it might say, or not say, about Catholic orthodoxy as such – as readers it is not our job to mimic the Holy Office or assign a Nihil Obstat or Imprimatur to a work – but because of what it might say, or not say, to us as Catholics, of the ways in which a particular Catholic mind, at a particular moment in time, looked at something, which of itself may not be Catholic, but which may well contribute to "a better future" for Catholics.

Cardinal Montini recognised what Cardinals Pizzardo and Ottaviano had not; namely, that "better future" in Greene's work, by saying that despite Greene's generally "reprehensible" Whisky Priest, nevertheless "the reader is led to esteem the priesthood even if exercised by abject representatives". The irony of this comment may not be lost on those who, even now, are reflecting on Pope Paul VI's comments recently referred to by Cardinal Noè, about the swirling smoke of Satan in the Vatican since Vatican II.

If this short foray into Catholic literature has interested you and whetted your appetite for more, join us in a new initiative of the Caroline Chisholm Library in association with the Central Catholic Bookshop, which specifically aims to bring people together to read and discuss books and writings by Catholics that, taken together, might be said to make up 'Catholic Literature'. For full details, contact Professor David Birch at email birchd@deakin.edu.au