

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

In Due Season

It arrived in the mail, like a lot of packages do: a padded manila envelope with a paperback manuscript inside, and a letter from the publicist saying, *“Please read this.”* For once, I didn’t just shove it onto a shelf in my office and forget about it. And I’m glad I didn’t.

The book, *“In Due Season”* by Paul Wilkes, might be one of the most heartfelt, beautifully written spiritual memoirs in decades. It is an autobiography of a life that stretches from the poorest corners of Cleveland to the classrooms of Marquette and the side streets of Brooklyn, with stops along the way in the Hamptons and the rarified executive suites of the Avenue of the Americas. There is sex, drugs, rock and roll, and plenty of self-indulgence.

But there is also, in the middle of it all, one man’s aching search for God. Wilkes went from being a devout Catholic to a mediocre Methodist and then back to being a devout Catholic. The road he traveled is astonishing.

In an e-mail he once sent to me he described the book as “one man’s effort to show that even a ragged Catholic life can still have its moments of grace.”

Wilkes’ journey, I think, could be that of many American Catholics near the end of the 20th century. And what makes it an especially remarkable and moving confession is that Wilkes is unsparing when discussing his own sins. He leaves out nothing: the women, the drugs, the crazy ways he spent money. The Paul Wilkes he describes in the book was, to put it bluntly, a pig.

But he was one who found his way, step by painful step, back to God.

After a harrowing episode that leads him to suffer a breakdown, he pulled his life together and returned to his religious roots. He wrote some acclaimed books about religion, culture and the spiritual life. (*“Trying Out the Dream: A Year in the Life of an American Family,”* and *“Beyond the Walls: Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Life”* among them.)

He fell in love. He flirted with joining a Trappist monastery. And he finally came to rest in North Carolina, where he resides today.

My favorite portion of the book was this description of his vision of our Church, in all its diversity and richness:

“The Church was a billowing desert tent, once so tiny it held but a single man, wearing the simple clothing of the people of his time. It was now a vast tent, cobbled onto, ripped asunder, patched so many times in so many places, its poles bending in the wind, yet not breaking. A tent sweeping wider and wider so that no one would be denied shelter under its tattered roof. A tent not of man’s work or devices, but of God’s.”

In one corner of the tent, I could hear a feverish African drum Mass, in another, a Mass in Latin for those who would have it no other way. There, a great pipe organ; beyond, guitars and marimbas. In jungles and high rise office buildings, this was a Church presided over and attended by saints and scoundrels. All under this vast tent. Theologians debating the fine points of the Incarnation; a peasant in a field of maize, kneeling at the sound of the Angelus bell. And those men in lace, Curia officials, going about their work. The saints, the molesters. This all-too-human Church, gathered under the great tent of God’s love.”

That is our Church, in all its imperfection and grace, and Paul Wilkes’ gift is to have embraced it, after a long and difficult struggle, and then present it back to us.

This is fundamentally a story about death and resurrection; I can’t think of a better book for Lent. Look for it. Read it.

If you follow Paul Wilkes on his incredible journey, you may find your own faith deepened along the way.

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STATIONS OF THE CROSS

“Praying the Stations with Mary, the Mother of Jesus”
Fridays during Lent, at 7:30 p.m., followed by Benediction