

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

No Ordinary Fool

For summer reading, some people toss into their beach bag the latest potboiler by Jackie Collins or Dan Brown.

I took the memoir of an 81-year-old priest-theologian who grew up in one of America's most venerable Protestant families.

Am I a nerd, or what?

Fr. John Jay Hughes is actually something of a legend in the American Church. He's descended from a Founding Father, John Jay—yes, *that* John Jay—and is descended, as well, from a long line of esteemed Anglican priests. Both his father and grandfather were Anglican preachers.

And when Fr. Hughes decided to “swim the Tiber” and become Catholic in the 1960s, it stirred up quite a storm—making headlines on both sides of the Atlantic and causing an irreparable breach between him and his father. The elder Hughes even thought his son had lost his mind; he recommended that he see a psychiatrist and there were suggestions he might try to have his son committed. When all efforts to get him to change his mind failed, Hughes' father went so far as to tell him he was no longer welcome in the family home. The two never saw each other again.

All this is recounted, in fascinating detail, in Fr. Hughes' memoir, *No Ordinary Fool*—and it is no ordinary autobiography. It tells of one man's struggle to come to terms with his faith, with his family legacy, and with a Church that, once it had accepted him, didn't know what to do with him.

Born and raised in New York, and educated at exclusive prep schools before graduating from Harvard, Fr. Hughes spent much of his life studying and teaching in Europe. He even mastered German for a stint in Münster—where, it turned out, one of his teachers was a kindly and thoughtful professor named Joseph Ratzinger.

Writes Hughes: “Ratzinger could often be seen riding around Münster on a bicycle, wearing a beret. He lectured three times weekly at 8:15 in the morning. Evidence of his popularity was the presence among his hearers of a number of people from the town, who came to hear him before going to their offices.”

Hughes offers up choice nuggets of history, too. In 1959, when he was struggling with whether to join the Catholic Church, he wrote this in his journal following an overseas trip: “The most impressive thing about the trip is to have seen the Holy Spirit at work in the Church and in the world. The old order is passing away—most obviously in politics and society, but in the Church as well...”

This, mind you, years before Pope John XIII called the Vatican Council.

There is much more: Fr. Hughes dissects clearly but comprehensibly the complicated theology that divides Anglicans and Catholics. He expresses some strong opinions about Catholic liturgy—both before and after the Council. And he talks at length about his difficulties in finding satisfying work in this country. He became a Catholic priest, with a conditional ordination, in Germany, and wandered in the theological wilderness for years before finally being incardinated in St. Louis.

No Ordinary Fool will help many cradle Catholics to see their Church with fresh eyes—and, along the way, enjoy a unique and dramatic American story of faith and family. (Someone should snap up the movie rights, and soon!) It is subtitled: “A Testimony to Grace.”

I'd say it is also a testimony to love, to perseverance, and to the unfailingly creative work of the Holy Spirit.

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