

# A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

## *Onward, Christian Soldiers*

**T**here are many things to appreciate about August in New York, but one of the best is that you can actually get a seat on the subway.

This is no small thing. And if, by some weird chance (say, unexpected flooding or a steam pipe explosion), the subways are more crowded than usual, they are at least bearable. People aren't wearing thirty pounds of parka and wool. We're skinnier in August, so we fit better in the subway. And, because things slow to a crawl this time of year, and the boss is on vacation, and people are taking longer lunches and leaving earlier and planning for long weekends around sand and surf, most of us are in a better mood to begin with. We're less inclined to bark or snap.

All of which makes it easier to love our neighbor.

This is, I think, one of the toughest commandments. By nature, we just aren't all that lovable. The human condition (crowded subways, among other things) makes it so. Mankind is just more inclined to be cranky. Our lot in life is to struggle and sweat, toil and tremble.

Nothing is ever easy. Our days are full of impossible deadlines and impossible people, and it brings out the worst in human nature. A lot of mornings, it's easier to snarl than to smile.

Ever try to love the coworker in the next cubicle who just had his latest project rejected, only minutes after learning that his apartment was flooded by a burst pipe three floors above him on the very day that his old high school football injury flared up?

It's not pretty. You tend to want to avoid someone like that. You talk a little louder on the phone in your cubicle so that you drown out the sound of him banging his head on his desk. You give him a wide space when you pass him in the hall. And yet, "Love your neighbor" remains one of the cornerstones of our faith—an immutable and non-negotiable tenet.

We are told to give, even when we don't want to. We are told to offer, when we would prefer not to. We are taught to sacrifice and to love, even when others are incapable of receiving that love.

Riding a half-full subway, full of cheerfully half-awake people, I wondered about this, and looked around at these people I didn't even know. Could I love them? Would I even have the capacity to love them? And what would that love entail?

At its most basic, of course, love is the absence of hate and the fullness of concern. It is caring more for The Other than for yourself—or caring for that other person *at least as much* as you care for yourself. The challenge comes in loving those we have no vested interest in loving—and just doing it anyway, because it is what Jesus would do.

And then there is this: At bottom, we are all soldiers. A friend of mine once put it this way: "I think we need to be nice to others, because everyone is fighting a battle."

Riding that subway, I understood what she meant. We are all fighting our own skirmishes on the way to destinations we don't always know—hand-to-hand conflicts with our families, our jobs, our circumstances, our own sinful impulses. Some days, the war goes well. We should appreciate those days and count them as gifts.

And then, take a deep breath. Think of the stranger sitting next to you. That person is a fellow warrior—another soldier bracing for battle, even in the dog days of summer.

You can't tell where that person is headed—or what he or she will face. A general once said that war is hell. That's not the half of it. Our own personal wars, I think, give us one more reason to strive to love.

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