

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Swimming with Scapulars

I've never been wild about scapulars. I got my first one around the time of my first communion. Scapulars are light, almost flimsy, made of cloth and thread. They show wear and tear. They can unravel, and easily absorb every ounce of sweat. I never felt comfortable wearing them—which, I'm sure, is part of the *point* of wearing them. I gave them up at a young age and I've resisted the best efforts of my wife to get me to start wearing them again.

But there is a book that has me looking at them in a new light. It's called *Swimming with Scapulars*, and it's written by Matthew Lickona. It is a memoir of sorts, though it follows no strict chronology and wanders amiably through the author's memory, pausing to ruminate, sniff the air, admire the scenery and marvel at the idiosyncratic beauty of the Catholic faith.

It's a beauty that leaves Lickona full of admiration—and anxiety. He believes fervently, devoutly, enthusiastically—but he struggles to live what he believes, as so many of us do, and in his struggles he finds lovely epiphanies. He writes of his marriage, for example: "I think the relationship I have with my wife is the best chance I will ever have to love my neighbor as myself." Has there ever been a better definition of marriage?

Lickona is a mix of contradictions: a journalist who writes about wine for a California paper, loves the rock band *Nine-Inch Nails*, but abstained from sex before marriage and, in fact, waited for several days after his marriage, because his new bride was fertile.

The fact that he is able to write about these things with such candor is surprising; that he does it so engagingly is a minor miracle.

He writes that he thinks his faith is weak—but wasn't it St. Paul who told us that when he is weak, then he is strong? Lickona's strength lies in owning up to his doubts and uncertainties, and then gently, persistently, picking them apart. (Frankly, I don't think his faith is weak at all. If anything, he displays the curious mind that makes for the most ardent and fearless Catholics.) No one will ever accuse him of living an unexamined life; his ponderings and puzzlements are heartfelt, funny and true.

The book's title comes from a Christmas Eve swim he once took off the coast of Florida; he lost his scapular in the waves and felt, suddenly, vulnerable. His book embraces and celebrates that vulnerability. In the riptides of life, battered by waves and splashed with cold water, what are we left with but blind faith? How do we trust in The One we can't see, when the undertow is pulling us away from the shore?

Swimming with Scapulars is one man's effort to find his footing in this uncertain world, amid shifting sands and merciless currents. We're lucky to have people like Matthew Lickona to remind us that scapulars—like so many elements of faith—are delicate and easy to lose.

Hold onto them. And watch those waves.



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