

Gambling to win

No Ordinary Fool: a testimony to grace

John Jay Hughes

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Autobiographies can easily fail. In the spirit of "mistakes were made but not by me," they can become exercises in self-justification or, even worse, a long-delayed opportunity for debunking enemies and settling scores. Or they can become ponderously tedious, when their authors slot in masses of unnecessary and uninteresting details ("on that flight from Cleveland to New York I left my raincoat on board") or insist on listing all the celebrities they met at receptions, and keynote speeches they delivered at conferences. Fr Hughes keeps beautifully clear of any such self-justification, payback time and tedious detail.

The subtitle of this autobiography catches its tone. Throughout, Hughes bears witness to the Lord's ability to write straight on the crooked lines of human uncertainties and infidelities. With humility and humour, he describes his struggles with loneliness, sexuality and misunderstanding. Through it all God supported him, thanks to his steady commitment to prayer.

The son and grandson of Anglican priests and a direct descendant of a United States Founding Father and first Chief Justice, John Jay Hughes was a gifted boy from a privileged background. At the age of 12, he decided to become a priest and after graduating from Harvard University (he includes a hilarious story about President Lowell) sailed for England and did three years of seminary training at the Society of the Sacred Mission, Kelham (near Newark-on-Trent). Ordained to the Anglican priesthood in 1954, he served in several parishes in the United States and spent a year in an Anglican monastery before joining the Catholic Church in 1960.

Hughes describes the agonising struggle he faced in moving from Canterbury to

Rome – a move that brought great sorrow to his father. After a heart-rending farewell, they corresponded over the years but never met again.

After further studies (which eventually included a doctorate on the validity of Anglican orders), a painful dismissal from a seminary in Austria and years of waiting, he was received in 1968 into the Catholic presbyterate by the Bishop of Münster in Germany.

Being a "conditional" ordination to the priesthood, it shattered the normal precedent of regarding Anglican orders as clearly invalid and made Hughes an international celebrity. Years before, he had submitted to the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) a document tracing his orders, through the two Episcopal bishops who had ordained him, to Old Catholic and Polish National Catholic bishops acknowledged by Rome to be validly ordained. A positive answer came in 1959 from the Holy Office and it was on that basis that the German bishop later went ahead and conditionally ordained Hughes.

Twenty years of "exile" ended in 1980 when John May was appointed Archbishop of St Louis. At once he asked Hughes to become a priest of his archdiocese and his personal theologian.

This autobiography engages the reader constantly. Out of his own experience Hughes talks eloquently about prayer, preaching (and the indispensable preparation it demands), and the happiness that comes from being generous in tithing. He tells stories of great suffering, above all the premature death of the mother whom he adored: "My whole world collapsed. From this blow I have never fully recovered." Throughout, he witnesses to the joy and high adventure he has experienced in his life as a priest.

Before being ordained in the Episcopal Church, he went on a private retreat and made his confession to a monk, "a man of shining goodness and deep sanctity". "When I had finished my sorry tale of sin," Hughes continues, "he spoke words I have never forgotten: You're taking a tremendous gamble offering your life to God as a priest. And God is taking an even bigger gamble accepting you. You're just going to trust one another."

The narrative never becomes heavy. Wit and a self-directed irony carry it along briskly. Hughes also conveys a sense that life is a wonderful party to be at. He celebrates the centrality of friendship and dialogue in human and Christian existence. The book teems with affectionate vignettes of friends and relatives, like his maternal grandfather who, in the heady days of the 1920s, voyaged annually to France to replenish his stock of linen underpants (embroidered with his initials by French nuns) and revisit the land of his Huguenot forebears.

From his time of study in Innsbruck and then in Münster, Hughes retrieves charming portraits of his professors: Karl Rahner, Walter (now Cardinal) Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI). "Joseph Ratzinger's lectures on the Church in the summer semester of 1965 were the most beautiful I have ever heard at any of the three universities I have attended on any subject. After every lecture, one wanted to go into a church and pray."

God set the agenda for the life of John Jay Hughes, a prodigiously gifted person and priest. I cannot recommend this autobiography too highly.

Gerald O'Collins

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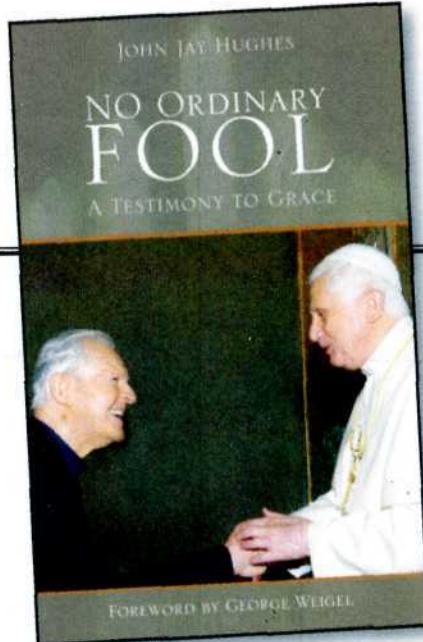
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Catholic literature abounds in conversion stories, and many of these “Home to Rome” tales have a sort of apologetic edge. *No Ordinary Fool*, however, transcends that genre. While no one could miss Fr. John Jay Hughes’ deep love for Catholicism, this is far more than an argument for Roman verities. It is a piercing, wise memoir, written by a priest who has prayed and thought deeply about matters of both head and heart. Hughes is admired across ideological fault lines because he cuts to the core of things, to the restless need of the human heart for a love that lasts. Anyone who wishes to take that journey would do well to have Hughes as a guide.

— John L. Allen



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NO ORDINARY FOOL

A TESTIMONY TO GRACE

“A most dramatic life”

— George Weigel

“The most profound memoir of a personal spiritual search since Thomas Merton’s Seven Storey Mountain.”

— Eugene Kennedy

In a gripping narrative full of humor and self-directed irony, John Jay Hughes tells of the loss of his mother at age six, entry into the Catholic Church at the cost of estrangement from his Anglican priest-father, his lifelong search for God in prayer, and his joy in priesthood, “all I ever wanted from age twelve.”