NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Wilkes' autobiography is a spiritual classic

Arthur Jones | Mar. 4, 2009

IN DUE SEASON: A CATHOLIC LIFE
By Paul Wilkes
Published by Jossey-Bass, $24.95

Paul Wilkes has written the first 21st-century Christian classic. His *In Due Season: A Catholic Life* will rank alongside, not run second to, Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. It is its companion volume.

Wilkes is the Merton story run backward, then forward, then backward again.

Were he not such a fine writer -- easing off just as we're about to tire of him -- we could slip into heartily disliking him, and the book. It never happens. Something else does. Each life lesson is a foundation stone for a bridge that this forlorn, frequently exasperating, finally endearing man painfully constructs for himself and his readers.

His bridge, his gift to current and future generations of readers, is the link between two ideals of Catholic Christianity.

Read an excerpt from *In Due Season*: **Life at close quarters** [1].

At one end is Merton-like devotion to the poor, to peace, to the blessings of monastic tradition and tranquility, as vital now as then. At this end, Wilkes rightly dismisses the institutional shallowness and attempts at medieval control on which the ebbing system depends.

At this end, his decades of trials, his nerves (and ours) rubbed raw, demonstrate that the clerical life, the monastic life, the religious life, the life of vowed virginity and celibacy, are not a superior Christianity to the "vulgar" ways of marriage and family. We all are called. It is not how we respond, it is whether we respond.

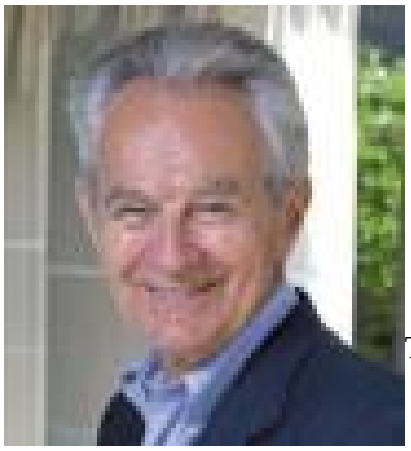
It takes Wilkes nearly 50 years to figure that out.

Wilkes was born in 1938, the youngest of seven children crammed in desperate Depression-era poverty into a one-room rented Cleveland attic. He would have been known as Paulus Vlk except for an Ellis Island clerk deciding on Wilks and his immigrant coal-miner father borrowing the "e" from Wilkes-Barre before the roofless family headed for Cleveland, where his father was promised a 40-cents-an-hour carpenter's job in a factory.

His parents had a sixth-grade education. Wilkes grew up in a Slovak Catholic immigrant box from which the only way out was education. He worshiped in his parents' native tongue. He was trapped, innocent, excited and bewildered by the world he lashed out at. At 17, driving his seriously and possibly terminally ill mother to a hospital for tests, he crashed the car and she was killed. He'd just graduated from high school. "That," his

sorrowing father says, "is some graduation present."

Pop psychologists could have a field day with the life that develops -- and totally miss the point.



There'd been another road trip just before that, when the brash, sexually prowling Paul and a Catholic pal had driven drunkenly all night in the pal's sister's car to the Trappist Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky in a bid to see Thomas Merton. From the visitors' loft, gazing on the monks' tonsured pates at morning service, they may have. Thereafter, Wilkes clasped Merton-in-print as his spiritual security blanket, with Christ and Dorothy Day as his goad.

College kid Paul works as a factory machine minder, then at American Can Company by night, joining the guys for beer and shots each morning before heading to classes at Marquette in Milwaukee with students from a world of relative affluence he can barely imagine. He's Catholic, solid, faithful to the core and horny as hell.

Next: The draft, a seagoing officer, the refreshing taste of solitude on a ship at sea for extended periods of time, marriage to a Methodist woman, Columbia journalism school in New York, a precocious journalistic success with brash *New York* magazine. The marriage breaks up. Long sexually deprived (by his account), he's already switched into a *poverello* kind of celibacy to cofound and run Christian Help in Park Slope, usually called CHIPS, the 1960s and '70s Brooklyn homeless world's subbasement.

Wilkes unsparingly describes life with the poor, the dissipated, destroyed, destitute and despairing. He labors with them, for them, daily among them, for 15 years. For the kid who'd emptied bedpans at a Milwaukee hospital as one of his get-through-school jobs, the shit, snot, vomit, the overwhelming stench and cockroach infestation of the world he has plunged into and remains faithful to, never overwhelms him. For him, it's the odor of sanctity.

What eats at him during these dark decades of the soul is his inability to see himself. He certainly can't laugh at himself. There's more irony than humor in the book. Revelation comes not from his repeated forays into monastic life, his prayer life or Mass-going or the wise words of those who love him -- it comes with a visit from *Newsweek*.

His first book, *Trying Out the Dream: A Year in the Life of an American Family*, which he'd half forgotten about, is suddenly an outstanding success. *Newsweek* wants an interview. In days, not even weeks, he's a celebrity and is offered his own television series. Plucked from a life even Dorothy Day found a constant trial, Wilkes is no better at understanding his hedonistic, different-woman-every-night, different-mood-enhancer-each-day sybaritic success than he was at analyzing his preoccupation with the poor.

He fails at hedonism, comes out of it, flops again and again. The reader wants to bat him across his head with his own book and yell, "There she is, marry her, have kids, you're a writer," just as Jacques, one of his many beautifully drawn mentors, tries to explain.

So, of course, obtuse Wilkes doesn't see it. Then finally, he does.

The bridge between ideals that Wilkes builds with this book carries the American Catholic story from the ghetto, through war, through Vatican II, through the hedonistic 1970s, through a changing church, through the ravages of affluence and easy money, to the questioning of today.

Merton revealed the glories, the commitment of the monastic life after his own hedonistic start. Wilkes did that life in reverse.

His routine still includes three days a month in a monastery.

In Due Season ranks alongside Merton's best because Wilkes absorbed Merton, then moved forward with him, and ultimately beyond him.

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Printed in the Mar. 6 issue of NCR.

Source URL (retrieved on *09/01/2015 - 14:19*): http://ncronline.org/books/2012/09/wilkes-autobiography-spiritual-classic

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