

Witness to extraordinary change

Thomas Gumbleton | Dec. 16, 2010

Deep reflection missing from New Orleans archbishop's memoir

THE ARCHBISHOP WORE COMBAT BOOTS: FROM COMBAT TO CAMELOT TO KATRINA -- AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

By Archbishop Philip Hannan, with Nancy Collins and Peter Finney Jr.

Published by Our Sunday Visitor, \$24.95

Can you judge a book by its cover? Perhaps not always. But in the case of *The Archbishop Wore Combat Boots*, I think the book's cover captures the essence of this memoir by Philip Hannan, retired archbishop of New Orleans.

Most prominent on the cover is the picture of the combat boots Fr. Phil Hannan wore as chaplain to the 82nd Airborne paratrooper unit in World War II. More than anything else, this military segment of his life seems to be what defines him.

Also on the cover are smaller pictures of himself, President John F. Kennedy and Jackie Kennedy, an indication of how much his life is reflected off the lives of the many prominent people he has met during his 90-plus years.

There is no question but that the book is, as the cover also states, "a memoir of an extraordinary life." Hannan, born May 20, 1913, has lived through times of extraordinary change in the United States as this nation evolved from a rather minor player on the world stage to becoming "the indispensable nation," as a recent U.S. secretary of state described us.

As a seminarian, priest and bishop, Hannan experienced from an intimate perspective the profound changes that have taken place in the Catholic church during his 97 years. Because of his role as citizen, soldier and ecclesiastic -- and living in the nation's capital and in Rome -- the book almost serves as a quick survey course in U.S. and church history over the last century.

Overall, the book is a disappointment, at least for this reader. I was hopeful Hannan would share some of his inner struggles as he dealt with so many of the huge issues confronting both the church and our nation.

A courageous minister to the soldiers with whom he shared the brutality of war, he seems never to have had a doubt about the war in which he was so deeply involved -- the firebombing of Tokyo on March 9, 1945, the 900,000 Japanese killed in the raids that followed, or, as the war exceeded the moral boundaries of what is permitted in a so-called just war, the final atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that Pope Paul VI described as "butchery of untold magnitude."

With the kind of seminary teaching in moral theology that Hannan and his generation received, I can understand how he might fail to question this counter-population warfare the United States resorted to at that time. However, I am amazed that he can fail to note the clear teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and

the condemnation of such warfare by every pope from John XXIII through Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

So, too, with his discussion of the sexual abuse crisis that even Benedict has identified as an evil within the church. He focuses only on how efficiently he dealt with it in New Orleans; there is no attempt to explore how it could take such deep root in the church.

When he makes the case that John Paul II will be named "John Paul the Great," he ignores the way this pope totally failed to deal with the sexual abuse scandal and in fact protected two of the worst abusers -- Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër of Vienna, Austria, and Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ and the pope's close collaborator.

At a time when the second-largest Christian "denomination" in the United States is the one in 10 Catholics who have "fallen away," Hannan seems to have no great concern about what might be driving people from the church.

On abortion, he states, "I have never been afraid to tackle an issue head-on," and explains he has confronted Catholic political leaders at considerable cost to his close friendships with them. But like most U.S. bishops, he does not seem to truly be able to listen to those who cannot vote to impose their judgment on others. He states: "Abortion is murder, and I don't care what anyone else calls it." Yet further on he writes very favorably about Lindy Boggs, who succeeded her husband in the House of Representatives (after Hale Boggs was lost in an Alaska plane crash): "A devout Catholic, she opposed abortion except in the case of rape or incest, where exceptions could be made." Eventually, Hannan assisted her nomination as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. To Hannan, is abortion not murder in the situation of a rape or incest? If it is murder, how does the archbishop (or indeed the bishops' conference, which supports the Hyde Amendment that allows this) agree to these exceptions? These questions seem to need some deep reflection; the archbishop offers nothing.

That said, I am grateful to Hannan for taking the time to develop this memoir. His experiences provide a good review of much that has happened in the church and our world over the past century. Perhaps other readers will find his account of his life as interesting and provocative as I did.

[Retired from administrative duties in the Detroit archdiocese, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton continues with his pastoral ministry, as well as speaking and acting on peace and justice issues.]

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