

One New Book for the Preacher

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AN AMERICAN REQUIEM: GOD, MY FATHER, AND THE WAR THAT CAME BETWEEN US by James Carroll. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996. 279 pp. Winner of the National Book Award.

James Carroll is known to many in the Presbyterian church because of his appearances in the video series, "Questions of Faith." A man my age, he was called to the priesthood and was in seminary in some of the same turbulent years I was called to the ministry, served in the military, and went to seminary. Because of Carroll's video appearances I have become aware of his novels and his presence as a Christian thinker and writer, so I was pleased to note last year the appearance of *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*.

An American Requiem is a deeply personal book. Excursions into autobiography are helpful in that they encourage the reader to reexamine her or his own experiences, memories, and relationships. Carroll tells of his parents, Mary and Joseph, devout Roman Catholics who grew up in Chicago and who were guided by the twin lights of Catholic devotion and American patriotism. Joe Carroll had been a seminarian in his youth, but left the seminary, he told Jim many years later, because he didn't feel worthy. ("You think I am worthy?!" Jim responded. "Yes," said Joe, "I do" (p. 214). Joe finished college and law school at night in his native Chicago, then joined the FBI. Still in Chicago, he was responsible for bringing in the notorious gangster Roger Touhy and received the notice of longtime FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

Joe, Mary, and their young family were soon transplanted to Washington, DC, where he worked in the central office of the FBI. In the early days of the Cold War, when the branches of the military were establishing their own intelligence departments, Joe Carroll moved from the FBI to the newly formed US Air Force with a direct commission as a Brigadier General. His job was to establish and run the Air Force intelligence operation.

The Carrolls strongly identified with the national life. Jim tells of going with his mother to Harry Truman's inauguration in 1949, and how regularly they witnessed subsequent inaugurations. There were White House meetings and receptions. There were always the national presence and the sense of power found at the heart of Washington. James Carroll grew up meeting and knowing famous, powerful people, and somehow identifying his faith and the national interest with each other.

He recalls the visits of Francis Cardinal Spellman, the Military Vicar of the United States, to his family when Joe Carroll was assigned to Wiesbaden, Germany. Jim was surprised to see in the back seat of Spellman's limousine cartons of Lucky Strikes with the cardinal's picture on them and the promise of a papal blessing, all for free distribution to the troops. ("Holy smokes!" says Carroll p. 72.) These were the days of Pius XII when papal directives precluded a Roman Catholic youth from filing as a conscientious objector. He also traces Spellman's involvement in the developing

conflict in Viet Nam, saying that it began as Cardinal Spellman's war (p. 164).

The family met the new pope, John XXIII, in a private audience at the Vatican soon after Angelo Roncalli's election. Carroll recalls the headiness of the moment in which Pope John touched his shoulders and spoke of Jim's vocation to be a priest. True, he had been struggling with the idea of the priesthood, but he had seen it as part of his upbringing and his parents' own deep involvement in the church. In this moment, he says, the vocation became his own.

Carroll finished high school in Wiesbaden and enrolled at Georgetown University. A summer job at the Justice Department brought him in contact with Robert Kennedy, who "said something like, What a great time to be a priest! Then he said something to the effect that priests were urgently needed in the streets, where the ministers already were" (p. 131). There was something thrilling about this to young Jim. *Pacem in Terris* had been issued, the Second Vatican Council had been called, Hans Küng was writing that the Communion of Saints is made up of sinners, Carroll – having shifted from Georgetown to St. Paul's College, the Paulist Seminary in Washington – was learning about form criticism and was beginning to discover the Bible at a deeper level. ("Here was proof that all those popes had been right, that reading the Bible could be dangerous" p. 118.) The Civil Rights movement was happening all around him. He recalls, "Segregation by race was an even more ruthless fact of the world I grew up in than by religion. I not only did not question it; I did not notice it" (p. 128). And, "What Hans Küng showed me about my church, Martin Luther King showed me about my country" (p. 153). On Jim's visits home to suburban Virginia, he found that Joe Carroll did not think there needed to be priests in the streets.

The tensions between father and son mounted as the Viet Nam war became a controversial fact. I often think it strange how nowadays hardly anyone can remember what the Viet Nam war was all about. Carroll's background of the way the United States got into the war is helpful, and a single paragraph on Nixon's prolongation of the war is particularly damning. When the Johnson administration had decided the war was unwinnable the death toll of Americans was only 16,459 and Americans had dropped about 1.5 million tons of bombs on Viet Nam. By Nixon's withdrawal four years later, an additional 41,676 Americans had died and 6 million more tons of bombs had been dropped, all while the peace talks in Paris were going on (p. 192).

James Carroll was ordained to the priesthood in the midst of all this. In celebrating his first mass at the Bolling Air Force Base chapel near Washington, Carroll preached from Ezekiel about the valley of the dry bones. He dared to use the word "napalm" before his parents and a number of their friends. The officers' club reception following the mass was poorly attended.

Following his ordination Carroll was assigned to the chaplaincy at the Catholic Student Center, Newman House, at Boston University. His work with the students included recommending birth control and draft resistance. The Cardinal Archbishop of Boston was less than impressed with these breeches of Catholic teaching. Carroll's role as an antiwar spokesman crystallized in his appearance on the Dick Cavett Show to discuss the riots at Boston University (pp. 224-226). As an outspoken participant in the peace movement, Carroll was becoming an embarrassment to his father. The public nature of the appearance left all secrecy behind.

As Carroll eventually left the priesthood and turned to a notable career in writing, his novel *Family Trade*, about an American intelligence official and his son, was

heralded in the Washington Post, “Confessions of an Ex-Priest.” His father responded angrily to the book. (“Never, repeat NEVER dedicate another novel to me! Never!” p. 258.) Their relationship remained on thin ice for the rest of Joe Carroll’s life.

For *Journal of Preachers* readers who might read *An American Requiem* there are at least three points of entry. The first is how Carroll struggled with the call to the priesthood. Every minister and priest has gone through the struggle of trying to discern what might be the right course for a lifetime. Carroll’s struggle is well chronicled and gives us, particularly those of us who were going through the struggle about the same time, plenty of provocation for remembering. The issue of human sexuality is perhaps more at the core for those who are struggling with the idea of a lifetime of celibacy, but all human beings are sexual beings and each of us who is called to ministry must come to terms with how we are to live in sexual integrity. Carroll does not dwell on sexuality, but does come back to it. The much larger issues are whether the priesthood is the right thing for him to pursue, the peculiar nature of his own calling to the ministry, and whether he can give himself to it wholeheartedly.

The second is the turbulence of the sixties: for all of us, the Viet Nam war, the assassinations, the civil rights movement; and for Roman Catholics and many Protestants the papacy of John XXIII, the effects of Vatican II, and the writings of theologians such as Hans Küng. Each of these was a landmark event, and together they have a great deal to do with the ways in which those of us who experienced them now look at our world.

The third is the relationship between a parent and a child, a father and a son. The younger thought the older a hero and accepted his standards as his own. As the son’s life grew and changed, the relationship grew more complicated – to the point that the son has now written a very fine memoir of the relationship to include both admiration and pain. Where is the minister who has not, at least at some time, felt the tension between his or her own family and the gospel we are called to proclaim and interpret for our time?

We are in Carroll’s debt for his sharing the stories of his life through some difficult but stimulating years. Just as with Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination, when he tells his stories we can remember exactly where we were.