

The Gates of Saint Charles: Testing the Waters of a Religious Vocation

John Allen Resko

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“I left the seminary not because I disliked the priesthood, but because I loved it.” The gates of St. Charles were the gates John Resko passed through as he left the seminary and the priesthood—gates to a new world, a new life.

This memoir of growing up in western Pennsylvania during the Depression, World War II, and Resko’s high school and college years in the seminary (1947-1957) will resonate with those who grew up during this era as well as readers curious about rural life and pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

Resko is a noted scientist in the field of reproductive biology with advanced degrees from Marquette University and the University of Illinois. He has authored numerous scientific papers and received accolades for his research and teaching.

But this book is not the story of his professional career. It is well-organized and footnoted, as one would expect from an academic writer, and written in a very accessible manner reflecting the author’s honesty and humility about his younger years.

Resko shares the stories of his grandparent’s life in Austria-Hungary and his parent’s immigration to the US. Settling in western Pennsylvania, his father purchased a small farm and also worked at the Patton Clay Works. The youngest in a family of seven, Resko writes of daily life in the town of Patton, his schooling, and the Catholic church where he worshipped. Resko consistently provides historical context to his family stories which enrich the reading.

Approximately one-half of the book covers his life before seminary. His decision to enter the seminary while a high school student was partially inspired by an older brother who pursued this vocation earlier. As he moved through the years of seminary during high school and college, Resko often questioned his vocation and sought advice. It wasn’t until his local bishop asked the very simple question, “John, do you want to be a priest?” that his future plans began to take shape. Deciding priesthood was not the life for him after many years of study and prayer was difficult. Resko shares his story in an honest, humble manner, highly respectful of those who stayed the course, including his brother.

Resko has terrific recall for the names of friends, teachers, and priests who were part of his life. He skillfully writes about other significant life events: life on the farm, his father’s illness and death, work in a shirt factory, and a life-threatening medical condition.

The book includes interesting photos and has an attractive cover. For those who enjoy memoirs, are familiar with western Pennsylvania, or interested in everyday life during the first half of the past century, this book will be an enjoyable read.

MARY CARY CRAWFORD (August 25, 2011)

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