

Love affair: Surprised by God

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

This past summer at our family home in Croatia, I was immersed in George Weigel's long biography of the late John Paul II, *Witness to Hope*. As the intense focus of world attention on his funeral made clear, he was a great world leader and, in many regards, a global moral conscience. That was plain for all to see during his life and even more clearly after he died. But what I had not realized until reading the book was that he considered holiness to be the prime qualification of a priest.

By being "holy" John Paul did not mean standing aloof from others with nose stuck up high and urging others to shape up by pointing to his own alleged superior qualities. Holy people are transparent for the loving God and give themselves in love to their neighbors. All of John Paul's limitations notwithstanding, his closest friends claim that he lived what he preached more consistently than most of us.

As I was reading about the saintly John Paul II, a friend gave me a book by a first-time Croatian author to "see what I thought about it." The book is a love story, a true confession written in first person. After a divorce, a young, successful, atheist lawyer is left with a small son and a desire to find meaning, to "touch that ground out of which everything grows." She enters a church about which she doesn't know very much, thinking that a priest might be able to help her. She meets a dynamic, progressive priest, falls in love and for more than a decade lives as his secret lover. Pulled into his world while continuing with her own career, she studies theology for a year and eventually starts writing sermons for him.

Gradually she comes to realize that something is profoundly wrong with the priest and her relationship to him. For he is not just a normally celibate priest who has, in a moment of weakness, slipped up on the chastity part of his priestly vows. He is interested only in worldly power and wealth and in women and wine. Although he is a servant of people, he despises them as rabble who ought to be exploited rather than helped. The woman participates in all this because she loves the man. Yet the more she reads the Bible the more uncomfortable she becomes. Living in the midst of hypocrisy, she is attracted to truth; living with a religious manipulator, she longs

for the God of grace. In what must be one of the strangest conversions ever, she encounters the living God by writing sermons for her hypocritical lover.

I was glued to the book, which is written under the pseudonym Eta Lodi to preserve the privacy of those involved (the author is a prominent judge in Croatia). At one level, the book is a love story in which a narrative of forbidden love with a failed “man of God” culminates in the discovery of the true Lover. As I was reading it, I was pulled by the unpredictable journey of the author’s desire—desire for love, for meaning and ultimately for God. At this level, the author is the main character of her own story.

At another level, the book is a critique of false religiosity. The priest in question is not simply an individual person; he stands for the whole system of institutionalized religiosity, a system drained of authentic Christian faith, a system in which custom and ritual serve as a cover for religious nakedness and as justification for exploiting simple folk. The book is also a critique of obligatory celibacy for priests. It exposes a subterranean world of people who take on holy orders but are unable to fulfill their own commitments and, unless they are willing to give up on their vocation, are forced to live double lives—to their own and their flock’s detriment. At this second level, the author is less of a lover than a prophet, and the corrupt priest is the main character.

I read the story primarily at yet another level—with God as the main character. It is a story of the power of the gospel in the midst of corrupt people and religious institutions. As I read the book, I thought of a line in one of Job’s speeches. Addressing God, he asks rhetorically, “Who can bring what is pure from the impure?” (14:4). The obvious response is: “No one but God.” Impure was the well to which Eta Lodi, thirsty for God, came to drink. And yet notwithstanding the mud of a corrupt priestly life and the strange concoctions of his sub-Christian teaching, she still found through him the spring of pure and living water! Which brings us back to John Paul II and his call for priestly holiness.

Is priestly holiness superfluous when God can work through unholy men and women (and sometimes does not seem to work through holy men and women)? Obviously, it is not. Life of genuine holiness is what God desires to create in individuals and churches, because that life is a reflection of God’s own life in humanity. But Eta Lodi’s story reminds us that the passing on of Christian faith is not primarily a matter of anything human beings do, not even primarily a matter of holiness that we exhibit

(or, as we like to say now, of our excellent practices). Instead, Christian faith is always a gift of God's life-changing presence.

"Light shines in the darkness," writes John the Evangelist. Whether it is the light that comes to us through God's holy people or the light that shines more directly into our hearts, it is always God's light and not human light. Indeed, any true light that we humans might have will always be, like the moon's, a reflected light.