

IN REVIEW FEATURE

Priest's diary details spiritual quest

Author sees light amid 'dark alleys'

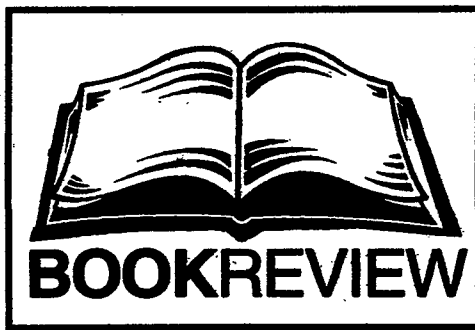
Diary of a City Priest, by Father John P. McNamee; Sheed & Ward (Kansas City, Mo., 1993); 258 pp.; \$14.95.

Reviewed by Joe Wakelee-Lynch
Catholic News Service

Father John P. McNamee's *Diary of a City Priest* is a spiritual journal, a diary of one person's search for faith despite struggle, loneliness and isolation.

He has written a diary of a year in the life of a priest serving a poor and dwindling congregation in central Philadelphia. The year begins with several of his friends getting robbed at gunpoint after Christmas Eve Mass, and it ends with the theft of his car — right from the locked parish parking lot. But those are the least of the problems in his neighborhood. "These desolate neighborhoods," he writes, "where people have nothing; nothing works; mayhem is frequent. Most of the life seems accidental. No beginning, no end, no middle nor sense."

Father McNamee labors in a desert, where the signs of spiritual vitality are sparse. His people fight a battle to survive and most of them, at least in this



priest's sad eyes, are losing. His job is to help them when he can, and he tries. He drives pregnant mothers to a local emergency ward, and he hands out \$10 here, \$20 there, to down-and-outers. All the while, he asks himself: What would Jesus do? To get through the days and nights, he recalls the writings of Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Compared to them, he comes up short, in his view anyway.

He knows he's in a desert, and he questions his hardiness. At 58, he's worn the collar for 32 years, serving mostly in poor, overcrowded and underserved neighborhoods. With his elderly years just ahead, Father McNamee doubts his staying power. He also fears the church hierarchy has no real commitment to inner-city people, especially the drunks, addicts, never-employed and prisoners he counts among his flock. Worried that he hasn't the energy, and that his church hasn't the will, he wonders who will

serve his people in the years to come.

Despite doubts and alienation, Father McNamee's memoir shines with spiritual clarity. Merton, Day and Weil are water in his desert. They go with him down dark alleys. It's a common misconception that spiritual dark alleys inevitably lead to open, green pastures. Father McNamee finds instead that the opposite of the dark alley is an alley with some light, and it's a faint but steady one that guides him: "I tumble into this corner of the world, not far at all from my childhood neighborhood, not far from the hospital where I was born ... Without much sense or belief in Providence governing the details of our lives, I must be grateful for the free-fall which has me here, more or less on my feet most of the time."

Father McNamee's road is a hard one. But he's found enough light to travel by: "I have little light, except that I should continue to be where I am and do what I am doing, only do it more generously and patiently."

Diary of a City Priest is a rich testimony to the travails and satisfactions of the spiritual search in the inner city.

Joe Wakelee-Lynch is a free-lance writer and book reviewer in Claremont, Calif.

At your bookstore or order prepaid from Sheed & Ward-MCR, 115 E. Armour Blvd., Kansas City, Mo. 64111. Add \$2 for shipping and handling.

Paper has a new look for the new year

This week's *Catholic Courier* has a new look to ring in the new year.

Graphics Manager Lorraine Hennessey has implemented a number of changes in the paper's design to give the *Courier* a newsier, crisper look.

Here are some of the changes we hope you will find more appealing to the eye:

The redesigned nameplate on the front page allows us more room for copy and graphics. Hennessey said the new typeface (ITC-New Baskerville) is what gives the paper a more newsy look.

She added that the traditional serif headlines and Baskerville body copy evoke an "historically strong image."

We have also grouped types of coverage into three sections — news, features and commentary — each with its own page headers.

In addition, by positioning page numbers at the top of each page, we hope to make browsing through the paper easier for you.

We hope you like the new look.

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