

FEATURE

Book compiles priest's 'radical' views

By Patricia Bartos
Catholic News Service

PITTSBURGH — Father John Hugo touched many lives during his 49 years as a priest of the Pittsburgh Diocese, not the least of whom was the Catholic social activist Dorothy Day.

Twelve years after his death his writings have been compiled in a book called *Weapons of the Spirit: Living a Holy Life in Unholy Times*.

Published by Our Sunday Visitor in Huntington, Ind., it is in essence a manual for Christian living.

Day had always credited Father Hugo's writings and his weeklong retreats as instrumental in reviving her lagging faith after her conversion to Catholicism.

She forever after referred to those retreats as "the bread of the strong" and attended many throughout her life.

Father Hugo's writings were edited for the book by David Scott, editor of *Our Sunday Visitor* weekly newspaper, and Mike Aquilina, editor of the *Visitor's* monthly magazine *New Covenant*. They worked with the keeper of Father Hugo's papers, his sister Cecilia.

Scott first encountered references to Father Hugo while completing his master's degree on Day's spirituality, and Aquilina is former editor of the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, diocesan newspaper.

Father Hugo was founding pastor of St. Germaine Parish in Bethel Park. He was also first director of the diocese's liturgical commission and was the diocese's



chaplain and retreat master.

The overriding theme of his priesthood was his belief that a committed life of prayer and a dedication to the Gospels are absolute requirements for living a life of faith. Such acts "sow the seeds" of faith, he often said.

Father Hugo taught that each person — not just priests and sisters — was called to a life of holiness. His concept is easily accepted today in an era of involved lay people, but it was considered revolutionary when he first defined it.

Scott said Father Hugo, who died in

1985 at age 74 in an auto accident, remains a "seminal figure" in the American church, particularly with his pacifist views.

"The church still doesn't have a handle on the violence issue," said Scott, who added that Father Hugo wrote extensively about it.

Some found Father Hugo's teachings too challenging and demanding.

"Rigorous" was a charge often lodged against him, according to his longtime friend, Msgr. Joseph Meenan.

Father Hugo did not preach sin, but imperfection, Msgr. Meenan told the *Pittsburgh Catholic*. He did not see possessions and attachments as sinful but felt they impaired a life of grace, the monsignor explained.

Misunderstanding and false charges dogged Father Hugo to the point that Bishop Hugh Boyle exiled him to a rural parish and forbade him to preach.

Bishop John Dearden lifted the prohibition. His successor, Bishop John Wright, who revered Father Hugo, made the priest a key figure in adopting liturgical changes called for by the Second Vatican Council. Bishop Wright also commissioned Father Hugo to write a book on St. Augustine.

Father Francis Ott, another colleague of Father Hugo, said the writer-priest did not "renounce the world" but urged detachment.

"What Christians must do if they would work for God is to grow in love," Father Hugo wrote. "And every growth in love presupposes a further detachment from creatures."

His view was that "all things created by God are beautiful and good, but you must

learn to see them as a lesser good, as passing things ...," Father Ott said.

"We were taught in theology that Christian life was a matter of being good, of keeping the commandments," he added. "But Father Hugo said this is not what Christ came to teach. Rather that you must love God, and that was the real commandment."

Father Hugo proclaimed a way of simplicity, prayer, pacifism and dedication to Scripture. It could be described as a "radical" Christianity that he defined as returning to the roots and basic beliefs of faith.

Aquilina said of Father Hugo, "He was the master of sudden illumination. He provides the point of spiritual life, and you can see what you need for your own soul."

The idea of sacrifice doesn't come naturally to people today, and they can choose not to suffer, Father Hugo taught. But, he asked, "At what price?"

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