Richard Gribble, C.S.C.

Navy Priest: The Life of Captain Jake Laboon, SJ. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015. Pp. xv + 358. Pb, \$29.95.

This book recounts the impressive life of Captain Jake Laboon, a decorated officer and Jesuit priest who distinguished himself through a remarkable twenty-two year career as a Navy chaplain. Born in Pittsburgh in 1921, he was the third-oldest of nine children, four others of whom also entered the religious life, three as Sisters of Mercy and one as a diocesan priest. A gifted athlete, but a mediocre student, he gained admittance to the Naval Academy in 1940, where the discipline and routine suited him well. After his commissioning, he served a tour of duty in the Pacific theater aboard the submarine the USS *Peto*, exhibiting bravery in the rescue of a downed aviator, an act that earned him the Silver Star. After completing his term of service, he surprised many by entering the Jesuits' Maryland province in 1946, part of the post-war surge of vocations. Though he considered the possibility going into teaching after his ordination in 1956, he could not escape the call of the sea, returning to the Navy to serve in its chaplaincy corps. From 1958 to 1980, he served with distinction both at home and abroad, including time in Vietnam, steadily rising up the ranks to officer-in-charge of Fleet Religious Support Activity and then to fleet chaplain of the Atlantic fleet. Upon his retirement from the Navy, he served in retreat and parish ministry until his death in 1988. By all accounts, he served with integrity and gained the admiration of those he cared for and counseled. As one sign of the esteem in which he was held, the U.S.S. *Laboon*, launched in 1993, was named in his honor, only the seventh vessel in Navy history to be named for a chaplain.

There is perhaps no one as uniquely qualified to pen a biography of Laboon as Richard Gribble, a historian of American Catholicism who is himself a graduate of the Naval Academy, a priest, and a member of a religious order. His account, told in straightforward fashion, provides plentiful historical detail about Laboon's times, and offers rich descriptions of the routines of both military and religious life. Those unfamiliar with those distinct cultures will gain a keen appreciation of the demands, duties, and training required. Regarding Laboon himself, the portrait one finds is that of a man who is exemplary rather than exceptional. Though he certainly had a commanding presence, standing nearly six-and-a-half feet tall, and was greatly respected among enlisted men and officers alike, Laboon adhered firmly to the military's code of conduct and was dutiful in his obligations. He was not one to challenge convention. Like others of his generation, he saw little tension in serving both God and country. His fellow sailors respected him as a chaplain and sought him out because

they knew he was one of them. As someone who had also served, he understood their particular needs and unique challenges. He also seemed to radiate a confident, steadfast faith that inspired and reassured. As one friend recalled, he was “a man’s man and a priest’s priest” (324). Though Gribble never had the honor of meeting Laboon, his admiration of him is clear throughout the book.

As solid and engaging as this biography is, it has difficulty conveying Laboon’s inner self since it is limited by a lack of material that captures his own voice and views. A man of action, who ministered most effectively in face-to-face encounters, he did not leave behind an extensive body of correspondence, or commit his personal reflections to paper. The biography therefore relies on others’ impressions of Laboon. Gribble draws heavily upon formal assessments of Laboon by his superiors and extensive interviews he conducted with Laboon’s family, friends, and fellow servicemen. These recollections, though sincere, capture Laboon as others wish to remember him. One former academy classmate, for instance, recalled that Laboon “excelled academically” (314), when in reality he struggled to earn Bs and Cs, as Gribble’s research shows. In the end, we are provided with a clear sense of what Laboon accomplished and his style of ministry, but are left to infer through them his personal motivations and desires.

Readers of this journal may be disappointed that more is not known about how Laboon understood his Jesuit vocation and identity. The biography does not offer any great insights into how Ignatian spirituality shaped his outlook or ministry. Indeed, neither available evidence nor family memory provides any clear sense of what attracted Laboon to the Society of Jesus in the first place. In many ways, though, Laboon was more enmeshed in the Navy than he was in the Society. Other than his time in formation, it was only upon his retirement from the military that he lived among his fellow Jesuits. As Gribble notes, the return to religious community, combined with the transition to civilian life, made for a difficult adjustment. Laboon also struggled with the feeling that his work in the Navy was not fully recognized or appreciated by his confreres in the Society. Given the changes in mission emphasis and theological orientation that had taken place within the American Society in the post-Vatican II, Vietnam era, he likely felt even more the outsider. It perhaps suited him to end his career serving alone in parish ministry in rural Maryland. But whatever tensions he contended with, he continued to find his work fulfilling. This book is a fitting tribute to one who demonstrated his love for “God, country, and the U.S. Navy” (129).

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