

CORNWELL'S LATEST FOLLY: TRYING TO SMEAR POPE JOHN PAUL II

By Ronald Rychlak

For about 20 years, author John Cornwell wrote as a disenchanted, former Catholic. Some of his early books sold well, but he really hit the big time in the past five years. He still writes books highly critical of the Catholic Church. Now, however, he writes not as a bitter former seminarian, but as a Catholic who is more 'hurt and confused' than angry.

In his latest book, *The Pontiff in Winter: Triumph and Conflict in the Reign of John Paul II*, Cornwell tries to convince the reader that this is a good-faith, balanced portrait of Pope John Paul II. Some of the promotion even suggests that it is sympathetic to the great man. Nothing could be further from the truth. Anyone who reads the book will understand why the subtitle of the British edition is: *The Dark Face of John Paul II's Papacy*.

This is Cornwell's third consecutive book critical of Pope John Paul II. The first, *Hitler's Pope*, purported to critique Pope Pius XII, who reigned from 1938 to 1958. Those readers who made it to the end of the book, however, learned that Cornwell's real target was not Pius but John Paul II and the papacy itself. [See "Cornwell's Errors: Reviewing Hitler's Pope," *Catalyst*, December 1999.] In fact, in this new book Cornwell backs away from his claims about Pius XII. He now says that it is impossible to judge the Pope's motives "while Rome was under the heel of Mussolini and later occupied by the Germans." The charges he made against John Paul II, however, remain in place.

Cornwell's second book critical of John Paul II was entitled

Breaking Faith. In that book, not only did Cornwell voice the typical “liberal” complaints about the Pope and the Church’s position on celibacy, women priests, contraception, and popular election of bishops; he also raised enough “conservative” criticisms about liturgical abuse, bad music, and the loss of ritual to be rewarded with a favorable interview/article in the conservative Catholic magazine, *Crisis*. [“See Guess Who’s Back?” *Catalyst*, Jan-Feb. 2002].

Now, in *The Pontiff in Winter*, Cornwell argues that John Paul has “taken a bit of the Iron Curtain with him” to the Vatican to mold a rigid, authoritarian papacy. He writes: “The Pope speaks but does not engage in dialogue; he hears but does not listen; he studies but does not learn.” Cornwell not only blames John Paul for the spread of AIDS, but also for global terrorism. He also says that John Paul has developed a “medieval patriarchalism” towards women and his “major and abiding legacy... is to be seen and felt in various forms of oppression and exclusion...”

Cornwell criticizes the Pope’s positions on social issues including the September 11 attacks, the clash between Islam and Christianity, and statements regarding Mel Gibson’s “The Passion.” His strongest criticisms, however, relate to the Church’s teaching on homosexuality, abortion, AIDS, the sexual abuse crisis, divorce, and the ordination of women. Cornwell charges that the Catholic teachings voiced by the pontiff have “alienated generations of the faithful” and that “John Paul’s successor will inherit a dysfunctional Church fraught with problems... A progressive pope, a papal Mikhail Gorbachev, could find himself presiding over a sudden and disastrous schism as conservatives refuse to accept the authenticity of progressive reforms.”

It is revealing of the polemic nature of this book that Cornwell uses Gorbachev for the example. In contrast, he denigrates John Paul II’s friend, Ronald Reagan at every opportunity. Cornwell even writes that in the office of

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, there were files on dead children whose murderers were "trained by Reagan's compatriots." The implication Cornwell tries to raise, however, cannot stand. Romero was killed before Reagan was even elected President.

Cornwell suggests that John Paul has an illogical (perhaps unhealthy) devotion to the Virgin Mary. He scoffs at the Pope's conviction that she saved his life when an assassin's bullet nearly killed him. He also writes that John Paul once told a crowd that, when he was a teenager, the Virgin Mary granted him "special interviews." He uses this to build the case that the Pope has an enlarged ego. In reality, what the Pope told the crowd was that he and his fellow students had been granted "audiences" by Mary – in other words, she listened to their prayers. That completely changes the story.

At one point in the book, Cornwell feigns sympathy for John Paul. He writes: "Whatever the character of the man who becomes pope, the papal role, in time, begins to take over the human being, the personality of the individual elected to the strangest, most impossible and isolating job on earth." In other words, the problem is not the man, but the office. For Cornwell, the problem is inherent in the papacy.

The Economist reports that Cornwell was "chastened" by the arguments and the evidence about Pope Pius XII that followed the release of *Hitler's Pope* and he is "now a better biographer." The only obvious lesson he has learned, however, is not to make false claims that are easy to disprove. In that book, Cornwell claimed to have had access to secret archives that he used to learn dark secrets about the Vatican. Those phoney claims were easy to disprove. This time, Cornwell instead cites a personal, inside-the-Vatican, deep throat: Monsignor *Sotto Voce*.

Taking Cornwell at his word, and accepting his description of Monsignor *Sotto Voce*, *The Pontiff in Winter* gives us an

“inside account” from a disgruntled and burned-out Vatican official who trades secrets for a good meal and a couple of bottles of wine. The great advantage for Cornwell, of course, is that this lets him write almost anything, and no one can prove it is false. Thus, without support, Cornwell:

1. Writes about “indications” that John Paul “probably” transferred money to Poland through the Vatican Bank and there is a “rumor” that the Mafia was involved.

2. Hints at a romantic affair in the 1970s with a married woman, and reports that secrets are contained in letters that are kept “under lock and key in an archive at Harvard.”

3. Raises the implication that as a younger priest, John Paul was “voyeuristic,” even though he admits that none of the people who knew the future Pope thought so.

In 2001, Cornwell wrote in the London *Sunday Times* that John Paul II was barely competent. When he was challenged, he wrote a letter to the monthly journal *First Things* (which Cornwell calls a “reactionary Catholic quarterly”):

I was given the information about the Pope on what seemed to be good authority at the time.... I have now double-checked the facts.... In consequence I acknowledge that mistake publicly through your periodical and I shall seek to correct the error also at an appropriate point in the *Sunday Times*.

Not only did Cornwell never make that correction in the *Sunday Times*, he reasserted the same error (about that same time period) in this new book.

Cornwell takes many cheap evaluative shots in *The Pontiff in Winter*. He says that John Paul’s writing not only has a “usual aptitude for inelegant phraseology” but at times also reflects a “gaucheness” of “conceit.” As for the Pope’s (elsewhere highly praised) work as a young philosopher, Cornwell says that it shows that he was “academically, completely out of his

league.” In fact, despite the praise that others have lavished on the future Pope’s writing, Cornwell mocks it as a “punishment for priests in Purgatory.” As Tim Carney wrote in the *New York Sun*:

Without a single footnote to substantiate his claims and in many cases lacking specific examples, Mr. Cornwell’s latest book looks less like a polemic and more like a half-hearted effort to cash in on his reputation as a disaffected Catholic writer. Even those who found the previous book compelling or controversial should see this books as the lame attack it is.

Damien Thompson, in London’s *Daily Telegraph*, denounced the book as “a hatchet job,” and called Cornwell a “sensationalist hack.” Suggesting that some of Cornwell’s earlier books had at least some limited value, Thompson wrote: “This new book is indeed a record of intellectual decline, but not quite in the way that its author intended.”

One thing going for *Pontiff in Winter* is that it has a great cover photo of Pope John Paul II. The same photo, however, also appears on Sophia Press’s recent republication of *The Church on Earth: The Nature and Authority of the Catholic Church, and the Place of the Pope Within It*, by Msgr. Ronald Knox (1888-1957). Readers who want quality content with the same cover should buy that book. Alternatively, for a solid insider’s account that covers the same ground as *Pontiff in Winter*, but does so from an honest perspective, one might try John Allen’s *All the Pope’s Men : The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks*.

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