

# Garry Wills: Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit

*by Robert P. Lockwood*

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It is a sad phenomenon of modern America that too often self-identified Catholics display anti-Catholicism or anti-Catholic rhetoric in the public arena. Anti-Catholic statements from Catholics, or those with Catholic roots, may seem to be an oxymoron. But it exists and those Catholics that engage in such inflammatory rhetoric against their own faith rarely see it as bigotry. Influenced by the dominant secular culture, they see anti-Catholicism as a product of enlightened thought, rather than an inherited prejudice.<sup>1</sup> Worse still, by the very nature of their Catholic background, their remarks gain a certain cachet in secular circles that would otherwise ignore them if the source were non-Catholic.

Generally, anti-Catholicism from Catholics comes from three particular sources. We begin with the "Uncle Pats."<sup>2</sup> These are Catholics who find Catholic beliefs and practices embarrassing in an age of enlightened secularism. Usually they are converts to contemporary agnosticism who consider themselves far too learned to practice the faith, yet identify themselves by their Catholic heritage. They do their best to show the secular world that they have "grown" by taking visceral pleasure in publicly denigrating Catholicism. When challenged for mocking Catholicism, their response is that they are "Catholic," though their practice of the faith might be minimal or non-existent.

Then there are those raised Catholic who convert to fundamentalist sects. Not all, of course, but too many of these former Catholics find it necessary to publicly heap

scorn on their heritage. They are often bitterly anti-Catholic. They adopt a literal interpretation of Scripture and fling epithets at Catholic beliefs worthy of a 19th-century nativist.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, one rarely finds Catholic converts from another Christian faith that behave in such a fashion toward their former denomination. For the most part, they have nothing but good things to say of their roots that they see as a positive part of their pilgrimage to Catholicism.

Finally, there are those Catholics who let their own vision of what the Church should or should not be poison their public comments. They often engage in the most shocking anti-Catholic rhetoric to push a particular agenda within the Church, with little interest in the impact such rhetoric might have on the image of the Church in the general culture. Their goal is to force change in the Church through assault. These are practicing Catholics who can come from any ideological perspective. However, they will engage in vicious and unfair attacks on the Church if they perceive that such attacks can bolster their particular viewpoint. In many cases, these attacks can be more vicious than that of the most engaged secular anti-Catholic or fundamentalist. Worse, they carry greater weight because the source is Catholic.

In his study of news media treatment of priestly pedophilia, for example, Philip Jenkins found that many of the false and invalid assertions over the extent of the problem had been generated in the secular media by those within the Church. It was exaggerated to the media in order to advance a particular cause within the Church. The so-called right used it as a means to discredit what they perceived to be liberalism and laxity within the hierarchy and in seminary training; the so-called left used it to push an agenda that would eliminate priestly celibacy and allow for women's ordination within the Church. Both sides used the secular media to exploit and exaggerate the extent of the problem.<sup>4</sup>

All of which serves as an introduction to Garry Wills' new

book *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*.<sup>5</sup> Wills seems to combine the worst features of all the above in a book that is both contrary to the teachings of the Church, and employs rhetoric against Catholicism that would never be utilized by a reputable publisher if the author did not identify himself as Catholic. If the author were not Catholic and prominent, *Papal Sin* would have only found a home in a far right fundamentalist publishing house or a small humanist press.

Garry Wills is certainly a prominent author. A Catholic, he currently teaches history at Northwestern University, though his public career goes back well into the early 1960s. Wills began as a protégé of William Buckley at *National Review*. He rather quickly had a change of ideological heart and became a well-known liberal author. He won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* and recently published a short study of the life and thought of Saint Augustine.

Wills has written a number of books on Catholicism, including *Politics and Catholic Freedom*.<sup>6</sup> Written in 1964 when he was still within the *National Review* orbit, that book was an attempt by Wills to explain how Catholics in the context of American political life could legitimately dissent in the arena of the Church's social teachings as defined by the pope. The book was written as a reaction to the battle that raged over Pope John XXIII's social encyclical, *Mater et Magistra* (*Mother and Teacher*). Written in 1961 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's great social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Pope John XXIII's encyclical stressed the importance of social justice and human rights, addressed political and economic inequalities among peoples and nations, and voiced the concerns of underdeveloped countries. In response, an issue of *National Review* proclaimed, "Mater si; Magistra no."

It became a curious debate, as one looks back with the advantage of hindsight. To oversimplify, certain conservative Catholics took issue with the focus of the encyclical and complained of its "anti-capitalist" slant in a world where

Communism threatened everywhere. Liberal Catholics defended Pope John XXIII's social agenda and argued that, as a papal encyclical, it should be accepted with "filial respect."<sup>7</sup>

Wills' 1964 book gave the conservative response, focusing not so much on *Mater et Magistra* but on the Catholic right to dissent from papal teaching, particularly in areas that do not touch on central notions of faith and doctrine. Wills' essential message was that papal encyclicals can err, and intelligent Catholics can legitimately disagree particularly when encyclicals deal with application of faith to contemporary issues.

Of course, when Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 many flip-flopped. Conservatives argued the vital nature of papal teaching; liberals defended dissent. The difference, of course, was that the issue in 1968 involved matters of defined faith and morals. While Wills, for example, could argue in 1964 that many areas of *Mater et Magistra* did not involve clear and long-standing Church teaching, that argument could not be made in response to *Humanae Vitae*. Church teaching on artificial contraception, though it had a convoluted history based on the weakness of scientific knowledge in prior centuries, could be traced directly back to the Church Fathers. Within the 20th century, Pope Pius XI had issued an encyclical in condemnation of the practice (*Casti Connubii*) and Pope Pius XII had reconfirmed that view in 1951.

That said, Wills was the rare bird in 1968 who was not caught having his own words thrown back at him. Wills had established a framework for dissent in 1964 that could be utilized again in 1968. His right-wing analysis in dismissing Pope John XXIII's social vision in *Mater et Magistra* had laid the foundation for his dissent from Paul VI's moral teaching in *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.

All of which serves as a lengthy introduction to *Papal Sin*. Wills had formally established a philosophy of dissent that

moved from social teachings to moral theology, from interpretation of Catholic teaching on contemporary issues, to the level of assent granted to the exercise of the ordinary teaching authority of the pope in moral theology. In *Papal Sin* Wills takes the last steps in the pilgrimage by denying papal authority altogether and in questioning foundational Catholic belief. Unfortunately, it is a pilgrimage that too many Catholics have taken.

*Papal Sin* reads and argues at varying times as if its author can't decide if he is a Bible-thumping fundamentalist, a secular agnostic or a bitter ex-Catholic. But for the most part, Wills comes across as a Catholic with such a heavy-handed agenda that reasonableness or any attempt to accurately portray Church teaching has long since been abandoned for ideological zealotry. Wills states, for example, that the arguments for much of "what passes as current church doctrine are so intellectually contemptible that mere self-respect forbids a man to voice them as his own."<sup>8</sup> Such language would demand an immediate retraction and apology if its source were non-Catholic. Wills – and Doubleday – believe that it is acceptable as long as the author of the statement claims Catholicism as his own.

The level of rejection of basic tenets of Catholic belief within this book is profound, considering that the author firmly claims his Catholic identity and describes himself as a practicing Catholic. There is the standard fare concerning active support for women's ordination, dismissal of celibacy, and embracing of artificial contraception. Wills goes further than many involved in Catholic dissent by also professing unqualified support for abortion rights.<sup>9</sup> But he does not stop there. In the course of the book he rejects the teaching authority of the Church if exercised without lay involvement and agreement,<sup>10</sup> the concept of papal infallibility and any possibility of divine guidance to papal teaching,<sup>11</sup> the ordained priesthood,<sup>12</sup> the doctrine of the Real Presence in

the Eucharist<sup>13</sup> and that the priest has the sacramental power alone to consecrate the Eucharist.<sup>14</sup> Apostolic succession,<sup>15</sup> the Immaculate Conception and Assumption,<sup>16</sup> and Church teaching on homosexuality are dismissed as well.<sup>17</sup> For the most part, the right for the Church to teach at all in the area of sexual morality is generally dismissed if it involves the actions of consenting adults.

It will be left to others to expose the theological deficiencies in Wills' arguments. Wills' personal rejection of much of defined Catholic belief is his own sad business. The public difficulty, however, is that Wills' book will be utilized by those outside the Church with an anti-Catholic agenda to reinforce their prejudices. While Wills certainly sees his book as a call to arms within a certain cadre of Catholics, the greater impact will be to reinforce anti-Catholic prejudices and assumptions within the secular culture.

Though the title is catchy, *Papal Sin* is not a collection of anti-clerical tales from the dark ages meant to poke fun at the papacy. There is no reference here to the legend of Pope Joan or the scandal of boy popes in the first millennium. Rather, "papal sin" refers to what Wills calls "structures of deceit" that he contends are inherent to the papacy. Wills charges that the Catholic Church exists in a system of lies, falsifications, and misrepresentations meant to prop up papal authority. And not only popes deceive. The whole structure and belief system of the Church, from sacramental and moral theology, to ecclesiology, Marian beliefs and the essential understanding of Christ's death as atonement for the sins of mankind, are part of a fabricated "structure of deceit."

The very title of the book – and the general thesis concerning "structures of deceit" – reflects classic themes of anti-Catholic post-Reformation propaganda. Much like Protestants in 17th Century England, or today's anti-Catholic fundamentalists, Wills is not content to merely argue that

Catholic beliefs are wrong. He argues that they are consciously wrong. Church leaders know these teachings are wrong, yet they still attempt to impose such beliefs on the Catholic laity. Why would church leadership engage in such deceit? They do so solely in the name of power. "To maintain an impression that popes cannot err," Wills writes, "Popes deceive."<sup>18</sup> Again, this goes far beyond theological exploration, dissent or disagreement with Catholic teaching. Wills is accusing the Church of conscious deception in fundamental beliefs. The Church knows these teachings are wrong, Wills charges, but they are taught anyway. These "pressures of deceit," Wills writes, "are our most subtle modern form of papal sin."<sup>19</sup>

Wills also embraces the "ignorant Catholic laity" portrait common to post-Reformation literature, though he gives his own twist to it. In this early Protestant argument, which thrives in today's secular world, Catholic laity believe in Church teaching only until they are exposed to enlightened thought. In Wills' twist, Catholic laity have been so informed and now dismiss most Church teaching. The difference is that in the past, the assumption would be that Catholics would depart from the Church when properly enlightened. Today, Wills argues, there is no necessity for that because they are simply rejecting a "structure of deceit" that maintains an unwarranted papal authority that is not true to Catholic tradition. Those Catholic laity who maintain orthodox Catholic positions – "papalotors" Wills calls them – are silently cooperating with the "structures of deceit." Catholics who reject these "structures of deceit" have, of course, grown.

The difficulty, of course, is that Wills' theory is based both on an inaccurate understanding of the teaching authority of the Church and of the papacy. Similar to anti-Catholic Protestants in the 19th century, Wills distorts Catholic understanding of papal authority and then proceeds to knock down that straw man: "The Pope alone...is competent to tell

Christians how to live”<sup>20</sup>; defenders of orthodox Catholicism believe that “the whole test of Catholicism, the essence of faith, is submission to the Pope.”<sup>21</sup> Catholics, of course, recognize the difference between the ordinary magisterium and infallible Church teachings. They also understand the teaching role of the papacy and its essentially conservative nature, in the best sense of that phrase, in defending the deposit of faith. The difference is that Wills summarily rejects any papal authority to teach and, as such, it has led him down a road that moves from quiet dissent on social issues to outright rejection of fundamental Church teachings. Catholics know that once it is denied that the Church can teach authoritatively through its foundation in Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in matters of faith and doctrine, one is reduced to a faith of his or her own creation.

Wills’ book is filled not so much with argument and documentation as with statements. He makes assertions and those assertions are the only substantiation for his positions. “Women,” he proclaims, were “censored out of the Last Supper,”<sup>22</sup> without giving any Scriptural or historical proof for such an assertion. And, “It is clear that the Spirit’s presence in the community is what consecrates” the Eucharist<sup>23</sup> His sources are primarily secondary, and based solely on interpretations and expositions from those that share his views. Most of the book cites opinions sanctified by secondary sources that are as biased as Wills himself. His major source on priestly pedophilia, homosexuality and heterosexual activity is A.W. Richard Sipe, whose research has been seriously questioned both in its methodology and studied bias. Wills also misstates even friendly sources, or fails to acknowledge that reputable scholars seriously dispute the facts cited. For example, he states as fact that today “80 percent of young priests think that the Pope is wrong on contraception, 60 percent of them think he is wrong on homosexuality, yet the Vatican keeps up the pressure to have them voice what they do not believe.”<sup>24</sup> His cited reference



for these statistics is *American Catholic*, by Charles Morris, page 293.<sup>25</sup> In checking Morris, one discovers first that Morris clearly identifies that these were opinions of young priests analyzed in the mid 1980s – 15 years ago. Wills presents them as contemporary viewpoints. More important, the analysis that generated even these old statistics was strongly challenged for its accuracy at the time, and nowhere is that acknowledged. (Even in the vapid *Kansas City Star* survey taken in late 1999 to find out if priests were opposed to Church teaching on homosexuality, not even 20 percent of the priests responding advocated any change in Church teaching.)

Wills slips into a biblical fundamentalism when it serves his purpose. At times, he sounds like the anti-Catholic comic book publisher Jack Chick. He attacks the consecrated priesthood as an invention of the Church in the Fourth Century as a means to limit the growing popularity of the desert hermits. He declares that women were Apostles, stating that the reference by Paul to “Junias” in Romans 16: 7 is a cleverly edited reference to a female apostle, “Junia.” (While one could make an unprovable argument that Junias could be a woman, it is clear anyway that the use of the term “apostle” is generic and not referencing the Twelve.) Wills’ essential argument is that women should be ordained priests because there was no mention of ordained priests in the New Testament. Women can be priests because Christ did not *not* ordain women. Like a good fundamentalist, if a teaching cannot be cited chapter and verse in Scripture – a male-only priesthood – it cannot be doctrinal. At the same time, he ignores Scripture that contradicts his position. When the Gospels speak of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist, it is clear in Matthew, Mark and Luke that only the Apostles are present. Wills simply dismisses this as censorship of the reality of women in attendance without establishing any foundation for such a charge.

Again, with almost a fundamentalist perspective Wills displays

little understanding of Sacred Tradition and the development of doctrine. He dismisses the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a power grab by the Church to make the clergy “a hydraulic system pumping grace back into souls...a substitution of human agencies for the free action of the Divinity.”<sup>26</sup> He concludes that “grace is made a stuff controlled by the papal system of spiritual aqueducts and storage tanks. In a new form of idolatry, the Pope becomes a substitute for the Spirit.”<sup>27</sup>

The Church has long understood the value of theological reflection and the necessity of forever growing in our understanding of the faith. Wills never sees any progression in the understanding of doctrinal truths and moral teachings. He responds to Church teaching on women’s ordination by refuting ancient arguments of ritual impurity. He attacks celibacy in a similar fashion with no expressed sense of the reasons for the historical development of that discipline. Every action of the Church is viewed from the prism of an insatiable papal power. One of the greatest sources of scandal historically within the Church – the control of the appointment of bishops by secular authorities – he simply brushes aside. The desire to secure those appointments to the Holy See simply becomes another papal power grab.

While acknowledging at one point that Church teaching on artificial contraception is nearly as old as the Church itself and condemned by the Fathers of the Church, he states simply that we cannot “look for sanity” in their treatment of the issue. He condemns *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI’s encyclical that reasserted this traditional teaching as “truly perverse,”<sup>28</sup> while claiming that the only reason Pope Paul issued the encyclical was because he was “trapped by his predecessors.” *Humanae Vitae* “is about authority. Paul decided the issue on that ground alone. He meant to check the notion that church teaching could change.”<sup>29</sup> He offers no proof for that statement, of course, as the simple act of assertion is meant to make it fact.

In the discussion of abortion, he wanders off into the unanswerable issue of "ensoulment," (at what point that God "infuses" the soul into unborn life). He then speaks of abortions in nature, when the body spontaneously "aborts" and snidely wonders if this means that God Himself aborts millions of souls to "Limbo." Of course, the issue of ensoulment was debated in Church history to determine the stages of gravity of the sin but had nothing to do with the inherent evil in the killing of unborn life, acknowledged in the very earliest moral teachings of the Church (And it is foolish to equate Thomas Aquinas' presentation of the issue of "ensoulment" and his understanding of fetal development in the 13th-century with contemporary science's understanding in the third millennium). Of course, Wills knows that what we commonly refer to as "abortion" these days is the conscious choosing to abort life, not a natural miscarriage.

Wills berates pro-lifers that are willing to compromise on the issue in case of rape or incest, stating that this is proof of their fundamental dishonesty, rather than the realities that they face in combating legalized abortion within American culture. Wills concludes his discussion on abortion by stating that he supports legalized abortion, but that "it is not a thing that can be proposed as an ideal and that women should not make the decision lightly."<sup>30</sup> He never states why he holds that position. If fetal life is not worthy of protection – if it is not "life" – then what possible difference could it make if women make the decision to abort lightly? And why would it not be "ideal"? If the fetus is nothing, issues of "ideals" are meaningless.

Wills moves into even shakier ground with his discussion of Vatican I and the definition of papal infallibility. Of course, he sees the definition of papal infallibility in the Vatican Council of 1870 as the ultimate power ploy by Pope Pius IX. He claims that Pius was attempting to establish a new doctrine and that the brave dissenters were silenced by

papalotors in the Curia. Yet, as noted by Eamon Duffy, today's foremost Church historian, "Few nineteenth-century Catholics rejected out-of-hand the notion that the pope might teach infallibly. But many thought that it was dangerous to try to define just how and when that might happen. They thought it unnecessary, for the infallibility of the Church had never been defined, yet all Catholics believed it."<sup>31</sup> Wills portrays the Council as an argument for or against infallibility, and a minority in opposition with the deck stacked against them and virtually silenced by papal manipulation. In fact, debate was hot and heavy throughout the Council. As the conciliar fathers grew closer to consensus and understanding, a definition emerged that was far from ultramontane (that virtually every formal utterance of the Holy Father was infallible). The Council proclaimed no new teaching that extended papal authority beyond a point it had held for centuries. Wills seems to think so, even though the subsequent popes issued one ex cathedra statement (Pope Pius XII defining Catholic teaching on the Assumption of Mary in 1950) and did so only after extensive consultation with the world's bishops.

In his discussion of the first Vatican Council, Wills canonizes Sir John Acton, a British Catholic who had developed a loathing for Pius IX and politicked behind the scenes to undercut any definition of papal infallibility. A student of Ignaz von Dollinger, a German priest who would leave the Church over the definition of infallibility, Acton's primary contribution to the Council was his attempt to undercut it by convincing secular governments to interfere. He began "a campaign to whip up public opinion and British, French and German action to prevent the definition. There was talk of the English Cabinet sending a gunboat."<sup>32</sup> Acton actually managed to convince Otto von Bismarck's Prussian government to threaten to withdraw its ambassador from Rome, but the threat was never followed through. (Acton's rhetoric would eventually show its influence within the Prussian government. In 1871, the government launched the Kulturkampf against the Church,

seeing Catholicism as an “alien” presence in Germany and the declaration of papal infallibility of Vatican I an internal threat because of alleged foreign loyalty. A series of vicious anti-Catholic laws were enacted and many clergy and prelates arrested.)

Wills sees his “structures of deceit” as an essential “dishonesty” in the Church over papal authority. He sees dishonesty in history and dishonesty in Catholic doctrine all to prop up papal authority. While his 1964 book was respectful in its dissent, *Papal Sin* has a distinct tone of viciousness that moves it from theological dissent to anti-Catholicism. Like an anti-Catholic polemicist, Wills slashes and burns, inventing evil motives, distorting doctrine and history, and resorts at last to ridicule. He refers to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a teaching that would “muddy and confuse the nature of the Incarnation” and scoffed that Mary’s “very flesh was a cosmic marvel, like kryptonite, unable to die.”<sup>33</sup> Again reflecting the worst of fundamentalist rhetoric, he refers to Mary and Marian doctrine as creating “an idol-goddess”<sup>34</sup> that replaced the Holy Spirit as the object of Catholic devotion.<sup>35</sup> Quoting Sipe, he calls devotion to Mary a sign of male immaturity rampant in the clergy and hierarchy, and that if one sees oneself as a “child of Mary” this can “infantilize spiritual life.”<sup>36</sup>

Wills sees the canonization by martyrdom of Edith Stein as an historical dishonesty. Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a Carmelite nun, was murdered by the Nazis in the Holocaust. As a Christian of Jewish descent in a convent in Holland, Stein had first avoided arrest at the hands of the Nazis. But when the Archbishop of Utrecht publicly denounced Nazi deportation of the Jews, the exemption was canceled and Stein was caught in the roundup. She died at Auschwitz. Wills scoffs at her canonization as a martyr. Stein died because she was a Jew, Wills argued, and her Catholicity had nothing to do with it. Her canonization was a cold-blooded attempt to claim

victimhood for the Church in the Holocaust, Wills states. Such an argument is loathsome. First, Stein died because she was a Jew and a Catholic, the very specific reasons for her arrest. Second, that is the reason for the canonization, not some attempt to claim victimhood for the Church. Pope John Paul II has worked tirelessly for improved Christian-Jewish relations. The canonization of Stein recognized both her heroic Catholic witness, and her Jewish heritage. In any case, Wills can cite nothing but second-rate charges by unfriendly sources to make a claim of the Church grasping for victimhood, rather than documented proof of any such strategy.

Wills' book proceeds in a similarly mean-spirited vein. He states that the Concordat that Pope Pius XI concluded with the German government in 1933 would prevent the Church from protesting against Nazi actions against Jews. First, the Church had no choice but to conclude such a Concordat, or face draconian restrictions on the lives of the faithful in Germany. Second, the Concordat gave the Holy See the opportunity to formally protest Nazi action in the years prior to the war and after hostilities began. It provided a legal basis for arguing, for example, that baptized Jews in Germany were Christian and should be exempt from legal disabilities. The first official protest by the Vatican under the terms of the Concordat dealt with the government-initiated boycott of Jewish businesses. Though the Concordat was routinely violated before the ink was dry, its existence allowed for Vatican protest, and it did save Jewish lives. Wills also claims that the Vatican wanted a strong Nazi Germany as a bulwark to the communist Soviet Union, though there is no evidence that the Vatican ever entertained such a policy. In fact, Pius XII intervened with the hierarchy of the United States to assure assistance to the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany.

Wills tells the story of a "hidden encyclical," buried after the death of Pius XI, that would have condemned anti-Semitism. He concludes that the encyclical was killed because of that

condemnation. However, he then quotes from the encyclical statements that are clearly anti-Semitic and bad theology as proof of how anti-Semitic the Church was at the time. It was this weakness of the encyclical draft that was the real reason it was never published, not some lurking anti-Semitism. Pius XII, an outspoken critic of anti-Semitism along with his predecessor Pius IX, would never have allowed such a poorly drafted encyclical to be released. But Wills does not accept that. The real reason, according to Wills, was that even though it was a terrible work, it still maintained a condemnation of anti-Semitism that the Vatican was loath to make. Wills' arguments are not only self-contradicting. They also fly in the face of an encyclical that already condemned Nazis and their treatment of the Jews (*Mit Brennender Sorge*, 1937), and additional written and public statements that would be issued by Pius XII and the Vatican throughout the war years, including his own 1939 encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus*, on the unity of human society.

Wills states that the document on the Holocaust (*We Remember*, 1998) denied that some priests and bishops supported the Nazis. It did not. Wills then goes on to argue that since the Church is the People of God, if any members of the Church took an active role in the Holocaust, then the Church is "sinful." It's a curious theology that argues that any sin committed by any member of the Church becomes part of a collective guilt of the Church as the theological Body of Christ.

Such is the standard of reasoning throughout Wills book that he becomes so ludicrous as to proclaim that "Truth is a modern virtue."<sup>37</sup> That is stated about a Western culture that has as its bedrock value today that objective truth does not exist. Wills writes that the Church is "an institution that claims never to have been wrong, never to have persecuted, never to have inflicted injustice."<sup>38</sup> He does not state when the Church ever made such a claim, but certainly a hasty re-write will be necessary in light of the papal apology in March, 2000. But,

once again, Wills makes these charges without ever documenting what clearly cannot be documented. Like a sidewalk evangelist in the old South, he asserts beliefs for Catholics that Catholics do not hold, then refutes them.

Wills' book is an exercise in anti-Catholic rhetoric. He tosses out offensive phrases and charges that would never see the published light of day if he did not hide under the cloak of his Catholicity. He calls *Humanae Vitae* "truly perverse teaching on contraception."<sup>39</sup> He decides that Vatican II was simply another Church exercise undertaken "within a structure of deceit."<sup>40</sup> He cynically states that Pope John Paul II "makes sex so holy that only monks are really worthy of it"<sup>41</sup> and that his teaching is rooted in a "total devotion...to the virginity of Mary" so that "one man's devotion poses as the measure of divine truth. The rest of the Church must live in structures of deceit because this one man is true to his intensely personal devotion."<sup>42</sup>

Wills takes delight in calling priests "the peoples eunuchs" and notes that a man considering the priesthood must question if he is "to become a eunuch, not for the heavenly reign, but for the Pope's dominion."<sup>43</sup> In a book sorely offensive to Catholics, Wills reserves his most offensive language toward the priesthood. Not only does he refer to priests as "eunuchs," but constantly calls the Eucharistic prayer of consecration at the Mass "magic." Even a Jimmy Swaggart at his most anti-Catholic bombastic would not stoop to such a level of pure insult to sacred Catholic belief. In one of the saddest sections of the book, Wills makes fun of an old priest for whom he used to serve at the altar. The priest would carefully and piously pronounce Latin words of consecration over the Eucharist (Wills calls them "the purported words of consecration"). He chuckles that the priest was "making sure the magic formula was given all its force."<sup>44</sup> One wonders if he has lost all sense of decency.

Wills states without any documentation that priestly celibacy



has chased out heterosexual priests and created a gay clergy. He also cites the practice of celibacy as a primary reason for cases of priestly pedophilia, this despite absolutely no clinical evidence to support such a monstrous charge, and the simple fact that pedophiles are very often married. He twists John Cardinal Newman's theological insight on the development of doctrine to mean moving from untruth to truth – or vice-versa – rather than to a richer understanding of the initial truth. He takes the concept of the “sense of the faithful” – an essentially conservative doctrine that recognizes the beliefs held by the laity for centuries have a role in doctrinal understanding – to mean that anything burped out in a contemporary survey has an equivalency to the deposit of faith. He concludes by calling the Church “a victimizer with Satan,”<sup>45</sup> a perfect coda for a perfectly awful anti-Catholic diatribe.

Wills certainly considers his book some kind of affirmation for a small subset of Catholics who see the pope as the enemy and Church doctrine as a relic of the past. Unfortunately, Wills goes so far out that even the most liberal of Catholics will find this a distasteful exercise. In the end this book will only be supported by those who already actively hate the Catholic Church.

## **SUMMARY POINTS**

\*Anti-Catholic remarks by Catholics gain a certain cachet in secular circles that would otherwise ignore them if the source were non-Catholic.

\*There are Catholics who let their own vision of what the Church should or should not be poison their public comments. They often engage in the most shocking anti-Catholic rhetoric to push a particular agenda within the Church, with little interest in the impact such rhetoric might have on the image of the Church in the general culture.

\*If Garry Wills were not Catholic, *Papal Sin* would have only found a home in a far right fundamentalist publishing house or a small humanist press. It would hardly have been taken seriously without the legitimacy conferred by its prominent author being Catholic.

\*In *Politics and Catholic Freedom* in 1964, writing from a conservative perspective, Wills focused on the Catholic right to dissent from papal teaching, particularly in areas of social doctrine that do not touch on central notions of faith and doctrine. Wills' essential message was that papal encyclicals can err, and intelligent Catholics can legitimately disagree particularly when encyclicals deal with application of faith to contemporary issues.

\*Wills had formally established a philosophy of dissent that moved from social teachings to moral theology, from interpretation of Catholic teaching on contemporary issues, to the level of assent granted to the exercise of the ordinary teaching authority of the pope in moral theology. In *Papal Sin* Wills takes the last steps in the pilgrimage by denying papal authority altogether and in questioning foundational Catholic belief.

\*The anti-Catholic sentiments and language used by Wills would demand an immediate retraction and apology if its source were non-Catholic. Wills – and Doubleday – believe that it is acceptable as long as the author of the statement claims Catholicism as his own.

\*Wills exhibits the ordinary elements of dissenting Catholicism: active support for women's ordination, dismissal of celibacy, and embracing of artificial contraception. \*Wills goes further by also professing unqualified support for abortion rights. But he does not stop there. In the course of the book he rejects the teaching authority of the Church if exercised without lay involvement and agreement, the concept of papal infallibility and any possibility of divine guidance

to papal teaching, the ordained priesthood, the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Eucharist and that the priest alone has the sacramental power to consecrate the Eucharist. Apostolic succession, the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, and Church teaching on homosexuality are also subverted.

\*Wills' book will be utilized by those outside the Church with an anti-Catholic agenda to reinforce their prejudices. While Wills certainly sees his book as a call to arms within a certain cadre of Catholics, the greater impact will be to reinforce anti-Catholic prejudices and assumptions within the secular culture.

\*Wills charges that the Catholic Church exists in a system of lies, falsifications, and misrepresentations meant to prop up papal authority.

\*Wills is accusing the Church of conscious deception in fundamental beliefs. The Church knows these teachings are wrong, Wills charges, but they are taught anyway.

\*His sources are primarily secondary and based solely on interpretations and expositions from those that share his views. Most of Wills' book cites opinions sanctified by secondary sources that share his opinions.

\*Wills' essential argument is that women should be ordained priests because there was no mention of ordained priests in the New Testament. Women can be priests because Christ did not *not* ordain women. Like a good fundamentalist, if a teaching cannot be cited chapter and verse in Scripture, it cannot be doctrinal. At the same time, he ignores Scripture that contradicts his position. When the Gospels speak of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist, it is clear in Matthew, Mark and Luke that only the Apostles are present. Wills simply dismisses this as censorship of the reality of women in attendance without establishing any foundation for

such a charge.

\*Every action of the Church is viewed from the prism of an insatiable papal power. One of the greatest sources of scandal historically within the Church – the control of the appointment of bishops by secular authorities – he simply brushes aside. The desire to secure those appointments to the Holy See simply becomes another papal power grab.

\*Wills speaks of abortions in nature, when the body spontaneously “aborts” and snidely wonders if this means that God Himself aborts millions of souls to “Limbo.” Of course, “abortion” refers to the conscious choosing of action to terminate a pregnancy, not a natural miscarriage.

\*Wills states that he fully supports legalized abortion, but that “it is not a thing that can be proposed as an ideal and that women should not make the decision lightly.” If fetal life is not worthy of protection – if it is not “life” – then what possible difference could it make if women make the decision to abort lightly? And why would it not be “ideal”? If the fetus is nothing, issues of “ideals” are meaningless.

\*Wills portrays Vatican Council I as an argument for or against infallibility, and a minority in opposition with the deck stacked against them. In fact, most 19th century Catholics clearly accepted the infallibility of the pope and the divisions at the Council concerned the necessity and extent of a formal definition.

\*Those opposed to a formal definition at the Council were hardly silenced, as Wills charges. Debate was hot and heavy throughout the Council. As the conciliar fathers grew closer to consensus and understanding, a definition emerged that was not ultramontane (that virtually every formal utterance of the Holy Father was infallible).

\*Like an anti-Catholic polemicist, Wills slashes and burns, inventing evil motives, distorting doctrine and history, and

resorts at last to ridicule. He refers to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception as a teaching that would “muddy and confuse the nature of the Incarnation” and scoffed that Mary’s “very flesh was a cosmic marvel, like kryptonite, unable to die.”

\*Wills states that the canonization by martyrdom of Edith Stein was a cold-blooded attempt to claim victimhood for the Church in the Holocaust. Stein died because she was a Catholic and a Jew, the very specific reasons for her arrest. That is the reason for the canonization, not some attempt to claim victimhood. Pope John Paul II has worked tirelessly for improved Christian-Jewish relations. The canonization of Stein recognized both her heroic Catholic witness, and her Jewish heritage.

\*Wills states that the Concordat that Pope Pius XI concluded with the German government in 1933 would prevent the Church from protesting Nazi actions against Jews. The reality is that the Concordat gave the Holy See the opportunity to formally protest Nazi action. The first official protest by the Vatican under the terms of the Concordat dealt with the government-initiated boycott of Jewish businesses. Though the Concordat was routinely violated before the ink was dry, its existence allowed for Vatican protest, and it did save Jewish lives.

\*Wills calls priests “the peoples eunuchs” and notes that a man considering the priesthood must question if he is “to become a eunuch, not for the heavenly reign, but for the Pope’s dominion.” Wills reserves his most offensive language toward the priesthood. He calls the Eucharistic prayer of consecration at the Mass “magic.”

\*Wills states without any documentation that priestly celibacy has chased out heterosexual priests and created a gay clergy. He also cites the practice of celibacy as a primary reason for cases of priestly pedophilia, this despite absolutely no clinical evidence to support such a monstrous charge, and the

simple fact that many pedophiles are married.

\*Wills twists John Cardinal Newman's theological insight on the development of doctrine to mean moving from untruth to truth, rather than to a richer understanding of the initial truth.

\*Wills takes the concept of the "sense of the faithful" – an essentially conservative doctrine that recognizes the beliefs held by the laity for centuries has a role in doctrinal understanding – to mean that anything burped out in a contemporary survey has an equivalency to the deposit of faith.

\*Wills goes so far out that even the most liberal of Catholics will find this a distasteful exercise. In the end this book will only be supported by those who already actively hate the Catholic Church.

## FOOTNOTES

1See *Anti-Catholicism in American Culture*, edited by Robert P. Lockwood (Our Sunday Visitor, 2000), chapter one, for an historical outline of how anti-Catholicism remains an acceptable bigotry.

2A term first coined by Michael Schwartz in *The Persistent Prejudice* (Our Sunday Visitor). An excellent, if dated, review of anti-Catholicism, the work is currently out of print.

3There are any number of former Catholic anti-Catholics who could be quoted as representative. Bart Brewer, founder of "Mission to Catholics International" is a suitably hysterical example. Brewer, a former priest, was recently quoted as saying that the papal apology for past sins was part of a dark conspiracy "to rejoin separated brethren outside of Rome's control. Rome's mask will change, but the face remains the same. Catholicism is a political system." Quoted in the *Five Cities Gazette*, April 6, 2000.

4*Pedophiles and Priests*, by Philip Jenkins (Oxford University Press). Jenkins summarized his study in an article in the February, 1996 edition of *First Things*.

5*Papal Sin, Structures of Deceit* by Gary Wills (Doubleday, June 2000). All further references to Wills' book will give page number alone. Page numbers and content are from the bound galley edition provided by the publisher for review purposes.

6*Politics and Catholic Freedom* by Gary Wills (Henry Regnery Company, 1964).

7*America*, August 12, 1961.

8p. 5.

9p. 230.

10pp. 269-270.

11pp. 161-162.

12pp. 132-148.

13"It is more the faithful who become the body and blood of Christ than bread and wine do." p. 140.

14 "The validity of the sacrament (is) in the recipient's unity with God, not in any preceding words of magic of the priest." p. 140.

15pp. 159-168.

16pp. 205-220.

17pp. 200-201.

18p. 7.

19p. 9.

20p. 163.

21p. 6.

22p.118.

23p. 140.

24p. 6.

25 *American Catholics*, by Charles R. Morris (Times Books, 1997).

26p. 173.

27p. 173.

28p. 7.

29p.74.

30p. 230.

31 *Saints and Sinners, A History of the Popes*, Eamon Duffy (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 230 ff.

32 *Ibid.*, p.231.

33p. 212.

34p. 212.

35p. 207.

36p. 213.

37p. 8.

38p. 45.

39p. 7.

40p. 85.

41p. 101.



42p. 102.

43p. 128.

44p. 136.

45p. 311.