

Garry Wills: Why I am a Catholic

by Bronwen McShea

(Catalyst 10/2002)

Garry Wills is devoted to the so-called “spirit of Vatican II,” which he claims was hijacked by a backward-looking papacy. He wrote *Why I Am A Catholic* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002) to flesh out his differences with Rome, and to offer hope to “conscientious” Catholics that “reformation” is in the wings, that the true spirit of the Council will rise again.

Wills presents himself as a kind of oracle for this Vatican II “spirit.” He envisions an empowered laity, unencumbered by Roman assertions of authority or “petty” concerns about orthodoxy and obedience, and cheerfully building up the “people of God.” It is a vision of outreach, of a glorious harvest of Christ-like understanding, tolerance, and love. In writing his book, Wills purports to be following the Vatican II way, witnessing to his faith as a layman, offering his pen and public influence as God’s instruments for touching hearts.

It is time to call Wills’s bluff. For all of his posturing, the example he sets is not one of genuine outreach, tolerance, or love. He willfully mistreats the Church’s scriptural and historical foundations, undermining Catholic claims that often prove decisive in winning converts from other traditions. And he indulges unjustly and uncharitably his distaste for fellow Catholics who, in remaining faithful to Roman teachings on a host of subjects, offer a fighting strength to the “people of God” against the pitfalls of the modern age—among them the enervating materialism and moral relativism that find commonplace expression through our culture’s sexual fixations.

A former Jesuit seminarian, Wills deals with the Scriptural

foundations of the papacy with a carelessness to make even the most anti-papal Protestant cringe. Looking askance at Matthew 16, where Simon is renamed “the Rock,” Wills wonders whether Christ was only “teasing Peter when he called him ‘Rocky,’ *ab opposito*, as when one calls a not-so bright person Einstein.”

Yes, that’s right: Wills reduces a most solemn moment in the Gospel to a humorous interlude. He portrays Saint Peter—the man who identified Jesus of Nazareth as “the Son of the living God” *before* Christ acknowledged as much to any man—as a hopeless buffoon who “invariably takes the wrong action.”

Peter is denied his saintly dignity in Wills’s narrative in order to undermine the ancient principle that the successors to the Roman See are uniquely authorized by Christ to shepherd His people until the Second Coming. Wills replaces this principle with incoherent remarks about how the papacy—while always “indispensable”—can somehow keep the Church unified around the mysteries of the Apostles’ Creed without the power to arbitrate definitively on the innumerable disputes arising from the faith and its application in the world. This papacy would represent with infirm affability Wills’s rarefied view of Church unity while being unable to instruct the faithful on the Creed, the sacraments, or morality with any degree of clarity.

Wills wants to have his cake and eat it too, and the weakness of his position is apparent to any attentive reader. Protestant converts to the Church, especially, can tell us how important Rome’s unique claims to authority have been to their spiritual walk. They and the many non-Catholics who respect Rome’s ancient and eminently rigorous tradition despite deep disagreements with it can only be disappointed by Wills’s cavalier dismissal of papal authority alongside his non-Scriptural, essentially sentimental explanations for the papacy’s continued existence.

Along with his flippant readings of Scripture, Wills the

historian abuses his professional discipline to write a most tendentious, whirlwind account of Roman corruption, error, and folly throughout the millennia—again in order to undermine Vatican claims to authority. One of the more remarkable occasions of this is where he portrays King Henry VIII of England as a “loyal son of the Church” whose hand was forced by the incompetence of Pope Clement VII, who refused to condone the dumping of Queen Catherine for her vivacious and fecund lady-in-waiting, Anne Boleyn.

Yes, that’s right: Wills lauds a tyrant king whose axe fell not only on two of his six wives, but also on Saints Thomas More and John Fisher, and a number of other “papists” who rejected Henry’s revolutionary claims to be “Supreme Head of the Church of England.” This is the same Henry whose minions confiscated monastic lands all over England, looted Catholic sanctuaries, and desecrated the shrine of Saint Thomas of Canterbury.

Wills leaves out these facts of Henry’s reign for the simple reason that he wants to take a cheap shot at a pope who ruled against a divorce. He continues along in this unscholarly fashion, remarkably, by blaming the persecution of English Catholics after Henry’s reformation on the political interference of *popes* who gave them permission to resist a regime that oppressed them. Offering not a word on the messy English marriage of religion and politics responsible for dreadful persecutions, Wills claims that “the papacy’s political ties to governments opposed to England robbed Catholics of their presumption of loyalty.” He goes so far as to fault sainted martyrs of the Church for their “treason.” According to Wills’s formula for good Church and State relations, English and Irish Catholics should have just taken it on the chin when their masters arrested priests for saying Mass and sent all those presumptuous papists to the scaffold.

Wills desires a similar passivity from the “people of God” today in the face of cultural norms directly opposed to what

the Church has always taught about the sacraments, the Mother of Christ, and just about all matters sexual. He insults fellow Catholics on points of particular sensitivity: the concept of Transubstantiation in the Blessed Sacrament, and the sinless nature of the Blessed Mother and her miraculous appearances around the world. He yawns at the Aristotelian arguments about “substance” used for centuries by the Church to describe the miracle of the Mass, suggesting the concept of Transubstantiation was one of the many “petty” developments at the reforming Council of Trent. And he sneers at “the Marian zealots” who uphold Mary’s perpetual virginity against the tired protestations of amateur Scripture scholars, and who—with Pope John Paul II—believe in the “superstitious” “Fatima nonsense.”

Furthermore, Wills calls Vatican teachings on holy matrimony and ordination “silly,” suggesting that those who disagree are not “conscientious” Catholics like himself, but rather are trying to bring the Church back to the “dark days” preceding Vatican II. He accuses those who consider artificial contraception to be in any way immoral of “stubborn clinging to a discredited position” (leaving out, of course, by whom and in what way the position was discredited). He dismisses as “weird” the hope that a renewal of the culture of celibacy would help solve the shortage of priests. Without offering any thorough, reasoned counter-arguments, he sums up all the Vatican teachings concerning sexuality—the definition of holy matrimony, the Scripturally based prohibition on divorce and female ordination, natural law arguments against homosexuality, contraception—as “dishonest, naïve, or stupid on their face.”

Yes, that’s right: the tolerant, understanding, liberal devotee of the “spirit of Vatican II” can hardly *mention* those who disagree with him without resorting to *ad hominem* assaults on their intelligence and character. At a time when our scandal-ridden Church is starving for charitable aid from her

sons of influence and means, Garry Wills opts to expose fellow Catholics to great shame and ridicule and to increase the splinters between himself and all who adhere to the finer points of Roman teaching. His vindictive tone makes his calls to “the good will” engendered by Vatican II seem like so much hypocrisy and grandstanding.

The “people of God” can do without Wills’s instructions on insulting one another. And they deserve far better than the sort of faith he offers them—a faith that encourages their weaknesses, a faith so indulgent toward the moral relativism, the blinding naturalism, materialism, and sexual obsessions of our age. Wills wants millions of believers to sit by and ignore *their* consciences as liberal activists spread the Gospel of the Condom, the Gospel of the Priestess and Less-than-Immaculate Mary, and the Gospel of Divorce and Gay Unions throughout the world. Does he really believe that any of this would strengthen a Church so sorely in need of otherworldly virtues like restraint and self-denial? An academic with a Jesuit education under his belt should know better. Except for a sentimental attachment to rosary beads and an emasculated papacy, the Catholic Church according to Wills would be indistinguishable from our faltering secular society, with a dogmatic integrity and spiritual stamina to match it.

Wills audaciously equates his cause of reform to that of the medieval monastics and the conciliarists of the past few centuries. His is but a “lover’s quarrel” with the hierarchy of the Church, he says. Yet the greatest revelation from the pages of *Why I Am A Catholic* is that Wills needs to exercise far greater charity and humility in his personal crusade for “reformation.” To this end, he might reread the texts of his beloved Vatican II and the writings of his favorite authors, St. Augustine, John Cardinal Newman, and G.K. Chesterton, who receive considerable mention in his book. Surely along with the many one-liners that can be quoted out of context to gratify Wills’s self-righteous agenda are pages and pages that

speak to a far different “spirit” than the one he purports to know so intimately.

When Garry Wills matures further in his faith, he should write another book about it. In the meantime, let us wait with patient hope that the “people of God” will one day begin to benefit from the fruits of Wills’s “conscientious” labor.

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