

# John Cornwell: Breaking Faith

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Remember John Cornwell? In his last book, Hitler's Pope, he claimed that he was a loyal, practicing Catholic who had the highest regard for Pope Pius XII and wanted to write a book defending him. He said he received special access to secret archives due to his previous writings defending the Church. He said he spent months on end in a dungeon-like room studying the documents. Ultimately he was left in a state of moral shock and concluded that Pius XII was the ideal Pope for Hitler's evil plans. This claim was repeated in virtually all of the early reviews, and it helped make Hitler's Pope somewhat of a best-seller.

Before long a number of problems developed with Cornwell's story. First came a statement from the Vatican denying that Cornwell had been granted any special privileges. As he has since admitted, the archives that he saw were not secret. They were from the years 1912-1922 and therefore contained nothing about Hitler, the Nazis, or the Holocaust. Moreover, as he has now also admitted, Cornwell spent no more than three weeks doing archival work, not "months on end."

The rooms, by the way, are not dungeon-like.

It also seems that, contrary to his self-promoting claims, Cornwell was not really out to defend Pius when he started the project. He had previously written comments critical of Pius XII, calling him "totally remote from experience, and yet all-powerful—a Roman emperor"; and an "emaciated, large-eyed demigod." He had also written of "Pius XII's silence on Nazi atrocities." In fact, far from having defended the Church in his previous writings, to the extent they dealt with religious matters at all, Cornwell's writings were critical of Catholic

doctrine and the Catholic Church. Often he was openly hostile.

In 1989, Cornwell described himself as a “lapsed Catholic for more than 20 years.” In 1993 he declared that human beings are “morally, psychologically and materially better off without a belief in God.” He also said that he had lost his “belief in the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.” As late as 1996, Cornwell called himself a “Catholic agnostic,” who did not believe in the soul as an immaterial substance. This undisputed evidence (which is never mentioned in Hitler’s Pope) conflicts with his claim to have been a devout Catholic convinced of Pius XII’s sanctity when he started that project in the early 1990s.

When commentators pointed to the numerous inconsistencies in his story, Cornwell ignored their legitimate arguments and instead played the part of a victim – a wounded, deeply offended Christian who has had his personal faith questioned. He elaborates on this response in his new book, Breaking Faith: The Pope, the People and the Fate of Catholicism. The book is an amalgam of personal theology, Church history, preachy sermonizing, and predictions about the future. Of central importance to the author, however, is his explanation that although he left the Church as a young man and became a serious critic, a “miracle happened” in 1989, causing him to return to his faith.

In the first few pages of Breaking Faith, Cornwell explains why it is so important to him that he be recognized as a bonafide Catholic. He is an acknowledged critic of the Catholic Church, and “there is a world of difference between an authentic believing Catholic, writing critically from within, and a ‘Catholic bashing’ apostate who lies about being a Catholic in order to solicit an unwarranted hearing from the faithful.”

Although Cornwell assures us throughout the book that he is an “authentic believing Catholic,” his expressed faith is not in

the Catholic Church of Pope John Paul II. He picks up where the last chapter of Hitler's Pope left off: with an open attack on the papacy and the current Pontiff. One need go no further than the prologue to read: "John Paul is leaving the Catholic Church in a worse state than he found it."

Cornwell argues that there has been a fundamental breakdown in communications between hierarchy and laity and that this was brought on by John Paul's authoritarian rule. "Bullying oppression," he writes, is driving people away from the Catholic Church. He blames virtually all of the Church's modern problems on "the harsh centralized rules of Wojtyla's Church." He calls the Pope a "stumbling block" for "progressive Catholics and a vast, marginalized faithful."

Cornwell warns that if a conservative Pope succeeds John Paul II, the Church could face a "sectarian breakup." He argues that: "under a conservative pope the situation will deteriorate and expand rapidly, pushing greater numbers of Catholics toward antagonism, despair and mass apostasy."

Cornwell's evidence for a looming sectarian breakup is found in the decline in vocations and attendance at Mass, along with opinion surveys suggesting that many Catholics have difficulty with Church teachings on contraception, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality. In fact, he cites so many opinion surveys that at points it interrupts the flow of the book. The most serious problem with these surveys, however, is the way he uses them.

Consider, for example, the survey cited on page 254 of Breaking Faith. Here we are told that 65% of American Catholic respondents "hoped for a Pope who would permit the laity to choose their own bishops," and 78% "supported the idea" of the Pope having some lay advisors. Cornwell ominously reports that "for such a large proportion [of American Catholics] to challenge the authority of the Pope is remarkable."

There is nothing remarkable here at all. These are innocuous findings. I have some priest-friends that I would like to see made bishops, and I assume that the Pope does listen to some lay advisors. Depending on how the survey questions were phrased (which is left unclear by Cornwell), my opinions might well have turned up in the numbers cited above, but I would certainly not be challenging the Pope's authority.

Pope John Paul II is one of the most loved and respected men in the world, as opinion polls (unmentioned by Cornwell) continually show. Cornwell, however, uses only those polls suggesting that many American Catholics resist certain teachings. He interprets this as resistance to Papal authority, and the only solution that makes sense to him is to weaken the papacy and change the Church teachings. That, however, is not the Catholic way.

The very night that I finished reading Breaking Faith, I read an essay on John Henry Newman, one of the great Christian thinkers of the 1800s, who was made a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879. One passage of the essay seemed almost to leap off of the pages: "Newman would not have condemned any view more strongly than the one holding that opinion polls decide the truth. Nothing would have shocked him more than the thought that the faithful and not the Magisterium decide what is to be believed."

Obviously, Cornwell is no Newman. He does not accept the Church as the repository of revealed truth. His prescription would turn the Catholic Church into a simple reflection of modern culture. What a sorry church that would be.

Regarding the current state of affairs in the Catholic Church, recent statistics suggest that the decline in vocations may be starting to turn around. Still, the problems identified by Cornwell do merit careful attention. A much better book dealing with some of these same issues, but written from a truly Catholic perspective, is Joseph Varacalli's Bright

Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order(Lexington Books). Varacalli concludes that the real problem is “secularization from within.” By this he means that too many Catholic academics, intellectuals, and opinion leaders have been embarrassed by the Catholic subculture. His solution calls for us to embrace Church teaching, not change it. Too bad that his book has not been given the attention that Cornwell’s books have received.

Finally, while I hate to involve myself in this story, I must do so in order to clear up a false implication about certain Vatican officials. When Hitler’s Pope was released, my book, Hitler, the War, and the Pope, was at the publisher and ready for publication. Because of the controversy, however, we delayed printing the book until I could travel to Rome and review the documents that Cornwell said had left him in a state of moral shock.

Representatives of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints provided me with office space and the documents that Cornwell had seen. They asked me to determine whether he had been fair. As I explained in my book and in these pages, (Catalyst, Cornwell’s Errors: Reviewing Hitler’s Pope, December 1999), nothing in those files could lead an honest person into a state of moral shock. His claim was a fabrication.

Cornwell now writes that I spent my time in Rome studying – at the request of the Jesuits in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints – materials pertinent to *his* life. It implies that the Holy See has a thick file on John Cornwell, and that they shared it with me (their “favorite trial lawyer,” to quote Cornwell) so that I could discredit him. That is so far from the truth as to be delusional.

The only information I have about John Cornwell came from his books, his articles, or interviews that he gave to the press. I took those statements and contrasted them with what he was saying at the time to promote his book. There were so many

inconsistencies that they could not have been the result of honest mistakes.

Today, even most critics of Pope Pius XII realize that they have to distance themselves from the deeply-flawed Hitler's Pope. Those who are honestly concerned about the future of the Catholic Church are similarly well advised to keep their distance from Cornwell's new book, Breaking Faith.