

NOTHING LEFT TO COME HOME TO

William A. Donohue

Three men whose lives have been wrapped up in the Catholic Church, only to see their relationship torn, are John Cornwell, Garry Wills and James Carroll. Cornwell and Wills spent time in the seminary and quit; Carroll became a priest and quit. They are mostly known these days for writing the most scurrilous things about the Catholic Church. Moreover, they claim not to have left the Church, offering not a single reason why anyone should believe them.

Cornwell is an English journalist who in 1999 published a book about Pope Pius XII, *Hitler's Pope*; the title explains the book. Wills gave us *Papal Sin* last year; he basically accepts the Cornwell indictment, adding that the Church is engulfed in lies. Carroll is a novelist who most recently produced *Constantine's Sword*; the Church, he charges, is pathologically anti-Semitic. All the books blast the papacy and offer reforms that are designed to destroy the Church as we know it.

Their indignation with the papacy, however, is pure cover. On the surface, it does appear that it is the power of the papacy that gets under their skins more than anything. Now they might be believable if they were libertarians who held that concentrations of power are to be guarded against at all cost; then, at least, there would be some philosophical coherence to their thinking. But that is not the case.

Cornwell travels in fashionable leftist circles, Wills writes sonnets to the state and Carroll cites Ted Kennedy and Philip Berrigan as his heroes. In short, they have no problem with authority, per se, even when it is inflated beyond measure. Their problem is not so much the papacy as it is the popes. Indeed, if they knew for certain that the next pope would give

them everything they want—turning the Church inside out—they'd be the first ones beating the drums for papal supremacy.

There are other anomalies. Having fed junk food to the Catholic bashers worldwide, these authors take umbrage at the charge that they're anti-Catholic. Not only that, they say they're Catholics in good standing and will never leave.

But something doesn't add up. If what they say is true, why did all three of them find it necessary to write a book explaining their odyssey away from Catholicism? In this regard, Carroll's masterpiece, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, is so self-absorbed it would make Oprah blush. One thing is clear—the '60s drove them all over the edge.

Having told all, it is not clear why charges of Catholic bashing should matter. Take Cornwell. He recently berated me for misunderstanding his miraculous return to the Church as explained in his 1991 volume, *The Hiding Places of God*. But what is there to misunderstand? After all, he concludes his book by saying, "I could not say that I had found God, nor that I had been encouraged to believe in him [sic] again." And why did he allow his editor to write of him on the dust jacket that he is "a lapsed Catholic"? Why did he call himself an agnostic at the end of the book?

Wills and Carroll are no better. In addition to opposing the Church's teachings on celibacy, women's ordination, papal infallibility, the selection of bishops, and birth control, they can't resist mocking the Virgin Birth. Most important, what unites all of them is their adamant rejection of Christ as Savior.

Cornwell sarcastically refers to Jesus as "a figment of history," Wills denies the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and Carroll wants us to abandon the belief that Christ died for the atonement of our sins. Having thrown out

the central corpus of Catholic beliefs, they have nothing left to come home to.

Cornwell, Wills and Carroll may hang out in the Catholic Church, but they are more like borders than family members. They stay because they have to—it's the only power base they have. What, exactly, are the alternatives? If they join one of the established religions that gives them pretty much what they want, they lose their ability to influence public opinion on matters Catholic. Declarations of atheism are similarly useless. So they stay.

They also stay because they still think it's just possible they'll win. On October 15, 1990, James Carroll wrote in *People* magazine that the radical Catholic group, Call to Action, was attempting to get 100,000 signatures demanding that the Church institute all the crazy reforms that he and his alienated buddies wanted then, and still want. "I'll be surprised if they don't make it," he said.

The last news story on this subject appeared in the *New York Times* on November 11, 1991. "The 100,000 signatures," the paper said, "have proved hard to obtain." It concluded, "To date, the group has received about 21,000." It must be tough knowing there's nothing left to come home to.