

PAPAL SIN IS PALPABLE NONSENSE

by Robert Lockwood

A sad sign of the times is that 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. 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.

Such is the nature of Garry Wills' new book *Papal Sins: Structures of Deceit* (Doubleday). In this book, Wills employs rhetoric against Catholicism that would never be handled by a reputable publisher if the author did not identify himself as Catholic. If the author were not Catholic and prominent, *Papal Sins* would have only found a home in a far right fundamentalist publishing house or a small humanist press.

Garry Wills 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*. 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. His right-wing analysis in dismissing Pope John XXIII's social vision in *Mater et Magistra* laid the foundation for his dissent from Paul VI's moral teaching in *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. In *Papal Sin* Wills takes the last steps in the pilgrimage by denying papal authority altogether and in questioning foundational Catholic belief.

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 the embracing of artificial contraception. Wills goes further than any involved in Catholic dissent 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 Real Presence in the Eucharist and that the priest has sacramental powers along to consecrate the Eucharist. Apostolic succession, the Immaculate Conception and Assumption, and Church teaching on homosexuality are dismissed as well. For the most part, the right of the Church to teach at all in the area of sexual morality is generally dismissed if it involves the actions of consenting adults.

In *Papal Sin*, Wills comes across as a Catholic with a heavy-handed agenda. 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." 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 public difficulty is that this 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. 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.

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"; defenders of orthodox Catholicism believe that "the whole test of Catholicism, the essence of faith, is submission to the Pope." 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.

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. 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. 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." His cited reference for these statistics is *American Catholic*, by Charles Morris, page 293. 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 and never recognizes that these statistics were seriously challenged.

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, Wills knows that what we commonly refer to as “abortion” these days is the conscious choosing to abort life, not a natural miscarriage.

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 scoffs that Mary’s “very flesh was a cosmic marvel, like kryptonite, unable to die.” He refers to Mary and Marian doctrine as creating “an idol-goddess” that replaced the Holy Spirit as the object of Catholic devotion. 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.”

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 cynically states that Pope John Paul II “makes sex so holy that only monks are really worthy of it.”

Wills takes delight in calling priests “the peoples eunuchs.” 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 the Latin words of consecration over the Eucharist. He chuckles that the priest was “making sure the magic formula was given all its force.” 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 many pedophiles are married. He concludes by calling the Church "a victimizer with Satan," a perfect coda for a perfectly awful anti-Catholic diatribe.

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.