

PEERING INSIDE THE VATICAN

Mary Ann Glendon

Mary Ann Glendon, *In the Courts of Three Popes: An American Lawyer and Diplomat in the Last Absolute Monarchy of the West* (Penguin Random House Image Books, 2024)

Veteran Vatican journalist John Allen once wrote, after years of observing the Holy See, that “You could make a pretty good case that your odds of accomplishing something positive in the Catholic Church actually increase by a percentage point for every 25 miles or so of distance you put between yourself and Rome.”

After 23 years of service to the Holy See, I tend to agree with Allen’s judgment. But at a time when the Church is facing grave challenges on many fronts, I also believe that it needs all the assistance it can get, at all levels, including the Holy See.

One of my reasons for writing about my experiences during the pontificates of Saint Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, was to provide encouragement to young people like the college and law students who have told me over the years that they feel called to devote some of their time and talents to the Church in this time of turmoil.

Some of us remember that the Second Vatican Council was supposed to initiate a whole new era where the role of the laity is concerned. It was “the hour of the laity,” we were told. To their credit, the Council Fathers tried hard to waken “the sleeping giant” (as John Paul II would later describe the lay faithful). They reminded us that it is the laity who have the *primary* responsibility for evangelization of the secular sphere where we live and work: “The effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and

structures of the community in which one lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be performed adequately by others" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 13).

They also made it clear that none of us has the option of retreating from the world, withdrawing into a closed circle of family and friends. Even the members of our cloistered contemplative religious orders do not spend their time in abstract meditation. They are praying for the world.

But the sleeping giant proved hard to arouse. For one thing, the Council was woefully late in addressing the challenge of a world falling into disbelief, even though Saint John Henry Newman and others had forcefully sounded the alarm a century earlier. And, when they finally acted, they neglected the problem of formation. As Newman had warned, the lay faithful needed to be *prepared* to be a transformative presence in a world that was rapidly changing.

Then, just as the Council closed its doors in 1965, a profound cultural revolution in western countries presented the Church with a whole new set of challenges! Catholics, like everyone else, were caught up in the maelstrom. The Church and its leaders were wholly unprepared for the up-ending of moral and religious principles regarding sex, marriage, honor, and personal responsibility.

Today, the sad truth is that laity and clergy alike have been relatively unresponsive to the Council's exhortations. Recently, when Cardinal Francis Arinze, one of the few still-living Council Fathers, was asked: "What are the most challenging issues facing the Church today?", he replied: "First, convince each member of the Church—lay faithful (who are 99% of the Church), clerics and religious—to do his or her own specific part in the general mission of the Church. And second: Convince the clergy of the importance of the lay apostolate and therefore that the lay faithful have their own

distinctive role as leaders.” In other words, the Church is facing the same challenges that it has always faced since the beginning of Christianity.

Cardinal Arinze was right to put his primary emphasis on the role of the laity in the general mission of the church—the mission that requires all of us, laity and clergy alike, first and foremost to be witnesses to Christ wherever we find ourselves.

But it is more important than ever, in my view, for lay men and women to contemplate whether and how they might fit service to the institutional church within that general mission. With religious vocations declining in many parts of the world, lay people with their varied skills and talents can enable the clergy to do more of what they are called to do, what they have been trained to do, and what they know how to do best.

So, when consulted by young men and women interested in service to the Church, I have always encouraged them to be attentive to their promptings, while keeping in mind that there are bound to be setbacks as well as advances, disappointments as well as satisfactions, as with any other form of service. One of my hopes for *In the Courts of Three Popes* is that the account of my experiences will both encourage and inform the discernment of laypersons pondering how they might aid the Church in these difficult times.

As a lawyer and a student of politics, I had another reason for writing about those experiences, namely, to share some of the insights I had gained into the predicament of an absolute monarchy as it attempts to operate in the world of modern states. (I am aware of the view that the Holy See is not an absolute monarchy because the Pope is subject to divine law, but I use the term here in a political sense.)

The opinions I express in the book are based on my

observations of the government and administration of the Holy See. They are not the views of an "insider," but those of an outsider with a variety of vantage points. They were gained through heading Holy See delegations to three UN conferences; serving on the Council for the Laity, the Commission for the Jubilee 2000, the Commission of Reference for the Institute of Religious Works (Vatican Bank), and the Board of Superintendence of the Vatican Bank, as well as by chairing the Holy See Secretariat of State's Committee on Legal Affairs in the United States and serving for ten years as President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

One of the principal features that distinguishes the Holy See from most modern states is that it is a court, a court with its own distinctive internal culture. Today's Roman curia still bears many of the marks of its medieval predecessors where the courtiers are inescapably and permanently bound to one another and to the ruler; where they are acutely conscious of their own and each other's place in the hierarchy; and where intrigues over rank and favor abound. Curial culture is also inevitably influenced by aspects of the Italian culture by which it is surrounded and from which it draws much of its ecclesiastical and lay personnel.

The internal culture of the Holy See has hampered its ability to function in the modern world in a number of ways. To understand the current situation, it helps to recall that neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI, for all their great accomplishments, was a hands-on administrator. During the long pontificate of John Paul II, the Pope's mode of governing had been to set broad goals and leave trusted people to pursue them. Pope Benedict continued in that mode. Sometimes it worked out well thanks to faithful and competent prelates, but the combination of court culture and relaxed oversight created an atmosphere conducive to financial and other scandals.

Dysfunction was most noticeable in the area of finances, where the Holy See was slow to modernize and to align its operations

with internationally recognized best practices. When I began my service to the Holy See in the 1990s, I was astonished, for example, that travel expenses were being reimbursed in cash and upon minimal documentation. Later, one of things that worried me and other members of the committee overseeing US litigation against the Holy See was that the Holy See does not have a centralized department to coordinate its legal affairs. Cardinal Pell was similarly surprised when he found that there was no central management of the financial holdings of the Holy See, and he was dismayed when then-Sostituto Cardinal Becciu vigorously opposed his plan to have an external accounting firm perform an audit.

It might seem obvious that if there is one area where the Church is in particular need of lay assistance, it is where money is involved. But the problem has not been easy to solve. Just as few prelates are equipped with the skills to manage the finances of a sovereign entity, most are no better equipped to choose and oversee honest and capable lay experts—as witness the history of the Vatican bank where time and again trusted laymen turned out to be foxes in the chicken coop.

In 2022, Pope Francis took a step toward administrative reform with the issuance of a new Constitution for the Roman Curia. Besides making several changes in the organization and structure of the Curia, the document expanded opportunities for lay participation.

It will, however, take more than a new set of rules to change a deep-seated culture. Everything will depend on the character and competence of those who are charged with the Constitution's implementation. The notorious scandals of the Vatican Bank, for example, were not due to flaws in its governing rules, but to spectacular failures to follow those rules, and to a general disregard for the rule of law as such. As Pope Paul VI wisely remarked after the last reform of the Curia (in 1967), "It does no good to change faces if we don't

change hearts.”

To say that what is needed is nothing less than a transformation of culture may sound like a tall order. But that, after all, is no more than what all Christians are supposed to be doing anyway. There is encouragement to be found in the fact that the Church has emerged rejuvenated in many other periods when it seemed to be in serious decline.

Mary Ann Glendon is Learned Hand Professor of Law emerita at Harvard University and a former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See. In 1995, she led the Vatican delegation to the UN’s World Conference on Women in Beijing, becoming the first woman ever to lead a Vatican delegation.

Mary Ann Glendon is the most prominent lay Catholic person in the nation. An author, professor, ambassador—her work in defense of the family and religious liberty is astounding. Always humble, she never seeks the limelight. That is why I am happy to brag about her stunning accomplishments. We are delighted to have her serve on our board of advisors.

Bill Donohue