

"Papal Sin's" Greatest Sin: It's Scholarship

by George Sim Johnston

Gary Wills, the intelligentsia's favorite anti-Catholic Catholic, has mounted a fierce attack on modern papal authority in his new best seller "Papal Sin." It used to be that we had to go to Protestant fundamentalists for misinformation about the papacy. Now the work is being done by Catholic journalists, sometimes even by former priests – or in the case of Wills and John Cornwell, former seminarians. Wills is unhappy with modern popes because they won't change certain Church teachings. He has the usual menu of grievances: contraception, marriage and divorce, women's ordination, priestly celibacy, abortion. If only the Church would go flopping along with the modern world on these issues, Wills asserts it would thrive and prosper. But since everyone from the pope to the laity is trapped in "structures of deceit" which allow no change, the Church faces an increasingly unhappy future, although there will always be a "church of the Spirit" occupied by Mr. Wills and his friends.

We have heard all this before from Catholic dissidents, who never ask a simple question: The mainline Protestant churches have followed your progressive agenda to the letter – they have cast out dogmas, edited the Ten Commandments, issued members carte blanche on sexual behavior. Yet their membership is plummeting. And their doctrinal accommodations have not ended, but rather exacerbated, their internal quarrels. So why should the Catholic Church go down this path?

Like most heterodox Catholics, Wills is very shifty about the authorities on which he bases his arguments. He regards Vatican II as normative, but nowhere mentions that Vatican II affirmed what Vatican I taught about papal authority, which Mr. Wills abhors. Ditto on abortion, which Vatican II called "an abominable crime." Regarding abortion, Wills puts great weight on the fact that Scripture does not explicitly condemn it. But when the subject is the indissolubility of marriage, Christ's words on the subject are rapidly passed over. The early Church Fathers are quoted when their words suit Mr. Wills, and are ignored when they do not.

The reader quickly gets the impression that the Magisterium of the Catholic Church is a defendant in a kangaroo court. The most annoying aspect of the book is the author's loose manipulation of facts. Take the chapter on contraception. Wills writes: "Although if it is true that some kind of criticism of contraception can be found in Christian history from the third century on, it is misleading to call this a constant teaching." But the fact is that it has been a constant teaching, and every Church Father, starting with Wills' favorite, Augustine, condemned the practice with the strongest possible language.

In the pages that follow, Wills:

- Misrepresents natural law, implying that it was chiseled in stone somewhere by ancient Greeks or Romans.
- Implies that the church did not approve of periodic abstinence before Pius XII (it had done so at least a century earlier).
- Claims in passing that the Church found Darwin "unacceptable" (the Church never condemned his theory, and none of Darwin's books were forbidden).
- Misrepresents natural family planning, which, like all dissidents, he insists on calling "rhythm."
- Treats the so-called Majority Report of the "Birth Control Commission" as a definitive document which should have been binding on the Magisterium (it was not a "report" at all but a working paper with flawed logic and no teaching status whatsoever).
- Fails to mention that the birth-control pill often works as an abortifacient and is connected with all sorts of social pathologies, recently documented by sociologists like Lionel Tiger and Francis Fukuyama.
- Does not acknowledge the fact that every prediction made by Paul VI in the famous Section 17 of *Humanae Vitae* [of Human Life] has come true.

Wills thinks that Paul VI confirmed the Church's position on contraception because he was afraid of making the Church look bad by changing a definitive teaching. This is to misunderstand what the teaching office of the papacy is all about. It is not the pope's job to invent new teachings, or to change old ones after conducting opinion polls. The pope does not invent the truth; he locates it. His job is to determine that a certain doctrine is a part of the deposit of faith and then, if he wishes, to articulate that teaching as best he can.

The reason Catholic moral teachings exist in the first place is not so that the Church can wield authority and test our blind obedience. Rather, they are for our own good. The Church seems to be alone in knowing that, if we drive a wedge between sex and babies, between sex and marriage, we are inflicting damage on ourselves. A growing body of literature suggests that contraception is not healthy for marriage and that couples who use Natural Family Planning find that it actually improves their sex lives while not undermining the health of the wife. Somehow, none of this has made it across Mr. Wills' radar.

The good news is that the Church is changing in ways that puzzles Wills. He notes with distaste that the seminaries are beginning to fill with men who are inspired by John Paul II. It is a good bet that someday the only traces of the "renewal" espoused by dissidents of Wills' generation will be bitter books like this one, moldering on the shelves of libraries.

Copyright © 2000 [National Catholic Register](#)

George Sim Johnston is the author of "Did Darwin Get it Right?"

Posted on StayCatholic.com