

GARRY

Author of *Papal Sin*

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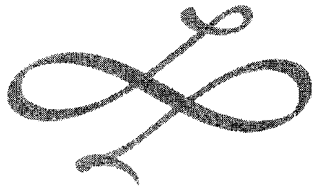
WHY

I AM A

CATHOLIC



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CATHOLIC



GARRY WILLS

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK

2002

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215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003.

Visit our Web site: [www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com).

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data* is available.

ISBN 0-618-13429-8

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Robert Overholtzer

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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TO ANNE O'CONNOR  
(*Sister John Joseph*)

## KEY TO BRIEF CITATIONS

- ABD *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (Doubleday, 1992)
- AAS *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1909– )
- ASS *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1865–1908)
- F W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1984)
- H Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton University Press, 1987)
- K J.N.D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford University Press, 1986)
- M Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford University Press, 1989)
- P Peter Partner, *The Lands of Saint Peter: The Papal State in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance* (Methuen, 1972)
- PL Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1857–1867)
- S Klaus Schatz, S.J., *Papal Primacy, From Its Origins to the Present*, translated by John A. Otto and Linda Maloney (Liturgical Press, 1996)
- Sch Bernhard Schimmelpfennig, *The Papacy*, translated by James Sievert (Columbia University Press, 1992)

Unless otherwise specified, translations are by the author.

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK is an unintended sequel to my *Papal Sin* (2000) — unintended because I thought that book treated a narrowly defined and self-enclosed topic, the papacy's dishonesty in its recent (anti-modern) era. Some read the book as something else, which they indicated by changing the title, from *Papal Sin* to *Papal Sins* — as if I were covering the whole subject of papal misbehavior over the centuries. It is true that I dealt with a number of disparate things — from papal treatment of Jews to claims of priestly prerogative, from documents on gays to condemnations of artificial insemination. But these were brought up not for consideration in themselves, only for the way dishonesty was used, in recent times, to defend whatever papal position was involved. Some Catholics asked why I was exposing the church's "dirty linen," though I did not mention anything that had not been fully ventilated in public. The newspapers had been full of controversy over pedophile priests, or papal relations with Jews, or the dissent of Catholic women and gays. Those were all out in the open. I revealed nothing about them — in fact, some conservative critics of my book dismissed it as containing "nothing new."

What was, if not new, then somewhat different, was my argument that these matters should not be considered in isolation, as if exhibiting different vices within the hierarchy — its anti-Semitism, or anti-feminism, or homophobia, or even a secret sympathy with pedophilia. I do not believe the modern papacy is afflicted with these attitudes. There has, on the contrary, been a sincere reaching out to Jews and women and gays — but all these gestures have been checked or rendered abortive by a continuing nervous insistence that "the church"



(by which these apologists mean the papacy) never really taught anything erroneous about these people. That is a claim that can be made only with the help of tendentious readings of history, suppression of evidence, or distortion of the evidence.

These maneuvers are justified — by those who think they must shoulder, all alone, the Spirit's role of protecting the church — as necessary measures to protect the mission of Christ. One of the most common objections to the book was the “everybody does it” argument — that is, leaders of every kind have to protect their organizations by stretching or evading or denying the exact truth about it. Those making this defense are the ones who do not really believe in the church, who think it can survive only by acting like any other political body. Admittedly, the rationale for such protective attitudes is different with church rulers — but only in the sense that they are protecting something more important than any mere earthly authority. This makes playing fast and loose with the truth more rather than less justifiable in their eyes. Anyone who doubts that this is the attitude should consider the long and energetic efforts of the hierarchy to cover up cases of priestly pedophilia. Abusing young innocence is not only a crime but a particularly vile crime, and covering it up is a crime added to a crime. Are the church authorities who did this moral monsters? What can have been their motive? They reasoned this way: since the saving truth of the gospel will reach more souls in need of it if they feel that priests bringing it to them are holy, it is necessary — for the good of souls and the honor of God — to maintain the priestly aura with deception. That is: the truth must be served with lies. There can even be a certain moral pride in the sacrifice of one's own repugnance to the crime, a sacrifice in service to the higher good of the corporate body. The Holy Spirit must appreciate this aid brought to the cause.

Any other explanation for their behavior, I submit, does them an injustice. They *thought* they were doing the right thing — naturally, since covering up the truth is such an ingrained habit with them. I was often asked, about my book, “Do you really think the pope and the pope's men deliberately lie?” Not quite. That is why the book's subtitle is *Structures of Deceit*. Given the priority of protecting the divine aura, and the terrible consequences of allowing it to be tarnished, the authorities do not allow the separate issue of truthfulness to distract them from the exigencies of their task. It is a luxury forgone, kept out of view, to be postponed while they meet immediate emergencies.

My book traced the same attitude in other and less lurid suppressions of the truth. I did not claim, for instance, that Pius XII sympathized with Nazism; I do not think he did. I expressly stipulated that he might have had a justifiable fear that action on his part would hurt those it meant to help. I focused instead on his post-war claim that he had *not* been silent, that he had spoken out “several times” against the Holocaust. That was dishonest. That came within the scope of my book. (Some of his defenders find themselves in the odd position of saying that his silence was justified but that he did not, in fact, keep silent. If silence was justified, after all, he *should* have maintained it.)

In the same way, I did not deny that the priesthood is a legitimate development in the history of the church; I said only that Paul VI was wrong when *he* denied that it was a development, claiming that it was instituted during Christ’s lifetime. Similarly, on the subject of priestly celibacy, Pope Paul relied on a fundamentalist reading of Matthew 19.11–12, which speaks of eunuchizing oneself, though he does not read in a fundamentalist way a similar passage like that recommending that one tear out an eye or cut off a hand (Mt 5.29–30). It was dishonest for the same pope to write a lengthy encyclical on celibacy while suppressing the most relevant text (1 Cor 9.5). It was what I called “intellectually contemptible” for the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to say women cannot be ordained because they do not *look like* Jesus (*Inter insigniores* 27).

I did not deny that there is a justification for the papacy — how could I, since I was praising John XXIII? I criticized a Curia that claims the papacy was *not* a development, that it was instituted in the New Testament, finding its first expression in Peter’s (non-existent) role as Rome’s first bishop. Strange to say, I was criticized as a fundamentalist when I pointed out that this fundamentalist argument is invalid. That did not mean, and I have never said, that there is no defense of the papacy. But that was not my book’s topic. Dishonesty was.

I did not anticipate, though I should have, that people would write me, in large numbers, sincerely asking what *would* be a valid defense of the papacy. How does one remain a Catholic while criticizing some of the church’s authority figures? I have never received mail of this kind or quantity in my forty years of writing. Most people who wrote me in the past were upset or outraged at something I had published. Those who agree with you just nod, most often, in silent agreement and move on; they have no need to vent their feeling. But in this case the over-

whelming number — over ninety percent — of letters and calls and comments began or ended with a thank-you for expressing what the correspondents felt, for letting them know they are not alone or that their own views could be expressed. These correspondents included priests and nuns who welcomed the call for candor in the church. That made all the more compelling some requests that I expand my book's closing comments on what positive things the church does or can do. What, they asked explicitly or implicitly, are the grounds of my own hope? Why am I still a Catholic? This I took as their way of exploring why they remain in the church. They were asking to compare notes.

Naturally, there were negative reactions to the book — in some cases, extremely negative. These differed from the first and larger group of responses in many ways. For one thing, the writers expressing gratitude proved by their questions that they had read the book. But some of the angriest letters I got admitted that the writer had not read my book, only some review of it in a conservative publication on the Internet or elsewhere. (I had not realized there are so many right-wing Catholic organs, ones I had never heard of, nor had Catholic friends I asked about them.) The first group asked how I stayed in the church. The second asked why I did not leave. Those writing out of gratitude assumed that I shared their (sometimes baffled) love of the church. The accusatory group flatly informed me that I hate the church, that I stay in it only to harm it, that I should get out before I do it irreparable damage. (Despite their belief in the church's divine mandate, these people express a great anxiety over its fragility — another attitude that makes shoring up the church with any material, even lies, seem justified.) So this group, too, asked, why I am still a Catholic, but in a different tone of voice. They meant, "Why are you keeping up this pose?"

A third body of responses to the book was neither as approving nor as disapproving as the first two. This was made up of non-Catholics (and some ex-Catholics) who were puzzled or bemused by the book, and by responses to it. On the one hand, they assumed that Catholics cannot "get away with" criticism of church authorities, and wondered why I had not been expelled. Non-Catholics are more certain that the church is authoritarian than Catholics are. Since they do not believe that the church is the people of God, and not simply the pope, they equate criticism of the part with condemnation of the whole. On the other hand, they wondered why I bother arguing about the church, which is for them an irrelevancy, though an interesting one. These sec-

ular observers treated me as an anomaly, to be explained each in his preferred way. Martin Gardner in the *Los Angeles Times* said that I do not seem entirely nutty — I probably do not really believe, for instance, that a whale swallowed Jonah — so I must not be a Catholic after all. Richard Rorty in the *New York Times* thought I was right to criticize dishonesty in church leaders but wrong to expect anything else — if the church tried to tell the truth, he said, it would perish. Falsehood is its necessary foundation. They too had a different tone of voice in asking why I am still a Catholic. They meant, “How can anyone not clearly a nut remain there?”

Of course I do not believe that one has to be nutty in order to be a Catholic (though there are nutty Catholics, just as there are nutty secularists). Nor do I think church leaders must lie in order to keep their organization afloat (some have actually told the truth, and it made the bark more seaworthy). But it seems unlikely I will convince those who are sure that the Catholic church cannot be taken seriously. I will mainly address, therefore, those in the first two groups, those who do take the church seriously but wonder how I can still take it seriously after having criticized its leadership so pointedly.

When I was growing up, saying why one was a Catholic would not have focused so much on one’s attitude toward the papacy. For Catholics in the middle of the twentieth century, the pope was a revered figure, but a distant one. We wondered why people like Paul Blanshard made so much of him, why Protestants and Others United for the Separation of Church and State were so sure that we followed his marching orders for the subversion of democracy. Actually, we didn’t know much about the positions alleged against him. Our piety had other bases. But now the pope is a celebrity who has been given vast media coverage, especially when he visits our shores (something unthinkable when I was a child). Pope John XXIII’s Second Vatican Council made Roman church politics a hot topic that literate people discussed — advertising, for instance, to the long *New Yorker* dispatches from the council. Papal attitudes came under a new degree of scrutiny — attitudes toward other hot topics, like women and sex. The church’s historical relationship with Jews has become particularly contentious. And the pope is at the center of these debates. Vatican II was supposed to diffuse authority in the church, making it more collegial, a thing shared by the whole body of bishops. But John Paul II has been more the center of action than any pope of the modern era, thanks to his charm, in-

telligence, and energy — and thanks to the uncompromising stand he has taken on issue after issue. He is an intriguing combination of personal popularity in service to unpopular positions. He is un-ignorable.

I cannot go back to the era when the pope could be, if not ignored, at least not made so much of. I am not a Catholic because of the pope. I am a Catholic because of the creed. I believe in that, and it does not mention the pope. In fact, it was formulated before there was a pope — but even to say that involves one in long arguments on the history of the papacy. Some have asked, Why not just keep the creed but forget the pope? Why not go to the Episcopal or Lutheran church, or join Eastern Orthodox Christians? But the pope is one of the reasons I stay, not a reason for going. I continually read the New Testament, after all, so wherever I find Christ, I expect to find Peter close to him. But the Apostle's relationship to his savior, always close, is never quite the same from era to era, and its current form will no more be its permanent one than were any of the earlier embodiments. There have been many papacies, and reaching a reasoned relationship with the current one entails taking a long hard look at the history of the institution. It also means learning that no Christian church is perfect — not even the Episcopal or Lutheran or Orthodox. We flawed believers live with our flawed fellow believers, even with flawed brothers like the pope.

I feel a bit uncomfortable making this book so personal. The church is a big thing; it will survive; it does not need my small testimony. But the questions addressed to me were uncommonly personal. They make me think that I am speaking for the first group of people, who remain in the church despite their own criticisms of the papacy, against the charges of the second and third groups. If I am a false Catholic, an insincere or a nutty one, then so are they. If I am told to “get out,” or to “wise up,” then so are my fellow troubled believers. Troubled belief is not disbelief, though “true believers” take it for that. I began, like all born Catholics, with serene certitudes instilled in me by my family and teachers. But those cannot be sustained without change while the believer grows up. An unexamined faith is not a faith. It is a superstition. The process of questioning one's faith is one that I have undergone with many, if not most, believers, most certainly with the ones who said they shared my critical attitude toward the pope without losing their fundamental commitment to the church. Though I may not always be speaking for them, I think my own development as a Catholic

is not peculiar to me but analogous to their experience. I am not a special case, but in many ways a typical one.

I begin, then, with my own experience of growing up Catholic. Critics of *Papal Sin* told me (and others) that I was expressing hatred for the church, reflecting no doubt some bitter experience with it, some resentment at what it did to me, some rebellion against what it asked of me. In fact, my experience with the church has been of a supporting and nurturing body, and I have never felt closer to it than I do now. I benefited from marvelous teachers, who taught me to question, and from a supportive family that was not disturbed by such questioning. I describe that world in this book's first part, establishing a background to answering the question, Why am I still a Catholic?

But it is only a background. Eventually, given the salience of the modern papacy, and the urgency of the many contentious issues it has addressed, my faith had to come to terms with the complex reality of the church's hierarchy. This leads to a long excursus on the history of Peter as a Gospel symbol, of the pope in the church (the first millennium of Catholicism) and of the pope above the church (the history of the second millennium) and of the church revitalizing the papacy (our modern condition). This excursus — a long one, but necessary for addressing the issue of the papacy as a historical (not just a dogmatic) reality — fills Parts II through IV of the book. Only when I have suggested how the creed can be integrated with acceptance of the papacy do I reach (in Part V) the real object of my belief, the creed. *That*, after all, is why I am a Catholic.



I  
BORN CATHOLIC





