

Écrasez l'infâme

Gary Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, Doubleday, New York, 2000.

François Marie Voltaire used to sign all his letters, *écrasez l'infâme*, “crush the wretch,” the wretch being the Catholic Church. Sister Catherine in her beautiful *Our Glorious Popes* writes of this man:

“Voltaire became a Freemason in England, around 1727, and on his return to France did everything in his power to spread it among the nobility and intellectuals. Unspeakably immoral, both in his life and in his writings, the intimate of Frederick the Great, because of the use Frederick could make of his extraordinary ability to write. Voltaire shared the Prussian King’s consuming hatred of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. It was their constant cry that the Christian religion is an infamous religion. It must be destroyed by a hundred *invisible* hands. It is necessary that the philosophers should course through the streets to destroy it as missionaries course over the earth and sea to propagate it. They ought to dare all things, risk all things, even to be burned, in order to destroy it. Let us crush the wretch! Crush the wretch! *Écrasez l'infâme!*”¹

Gary Wills and Voltaire have a lot in common; both are Jesuit products, Wills actually having attended a Jesuit seminary for a time. I think *Écrasez l'infâme* would be a better descriptive title of the Wills book than *Papal Sin*. His *infâme* is the hierarchical Church, especially the Papacy, which he wants to replace with a Protestant, democratic Church of the Faithful. He claims the Papacy has been a “papolatry,” the theme of this book, from the time of Pope Pius IX² to Pope John Paul II, excluding, of course, Pope John XXIII:

“The Pope alone, we are now asked to accept, is competent to tell Christian people how to live. No one else can have any say in the matter - not a Council, not the college of all bishops, not the national synods of bishops, not the Christian people. The Holy Spirit now speaks to only one person on earth, the omnicompetent head of the church that is all head and no limbs. If that were so, then the body of Christ would be shamefully reduced.” (p.163)

There is nothing new or original in the Wills book; he just follows the standard humanist line taught in Academia and published by the media. His section on the Jews could have been written by a member of the Anti-Defamation League. He blames the Church for the origin of Anti-Semitism, and the silence of Pope Pius XII for the Holocaust. He calls the canonization of St. Edith Stein an attempt by the Church to usurp the Holocaust, and he calls Pope John Paul II’s apology to the Jews, *We Remember*, a coverup.

“...it becomes clear that Stein is very useful for maintaining the argument of *We Remember*, that the Church was more with the persecuted than with the persecutors during the Holocaust. In order partly to clear the church of guilt for the Holocaust, it would partly usurp the sufferings of the Jews from whom Stein is now being separated in her death. She was being made a sign of division, the last thing she would have wanted.” (p.54)

If his writing on the Jews could have been written by a Jew, his writing on women could have been written by a radical feminist nun:

“Earlier when the disciples were scattering in despair after Jesus’ death, a man fell in with two disciples going off to their home (Lk 24:15). They stopped to eat at Emmaus. Only one of the two disciples is named, and he is male. The natural supposition would be that his wife was the other. But have you ever seen a picture of the supper at Emmaus that contains a woman at the table with the risen Jesus for the breaking of the bread? The whole way of imagining the Gospel has falsified women’s role in the life of Jesus and the founding of the church. The long working of poisonous notions - of women’s inferiority and impurity - has conditioned our heritage in ways hard to trace and difficult to extrude. That is why the ban on women priests matters. It is not so much that women are clamoring to become priests (especially as the priesthood currently exists), but the perpetuation of this ban keeps alive the whole ideological substructure on which it is based. It is the last fierce bastion where the great Christian lie about women has entrenched itself.” (pp.118,119)

Whenever he speaks of the priesthood, the sacraments and sacramentals, he sounds like a Protestant, sometimes even the worst type of fundamentalist Protestant:

“The introduction of private penance for lesser sins was done, like the granting of annulments for motives of compassion. But it went along with the sacralization of the priesthood, the monopolization of grace, and the severance of priest judges from lay sinners. Just as the priest alone came to consecrate the Eucharist, and withdrew into a sacred sanctuary sealed off from the layman, so did the priest become a judge of every aspect of a person’s life in the confessional. There was a commerce in grace which was conceived of as a quantifiable item. Mortal sin drained it totally from the soul. Venial sins lowered the level in the tank. Occasions of grace filled the tank back up. People were encouraged to go to confession frequently, even for minor sins, since more grace was poured in each time.

“Grace could also be acquired by authorized devotions, including the grace of an early pass from purgatory if indulgences were earned. Instead of the Spirit as a continual presence in the church, variously manifested but always energizing the whole, grace became a private possession (or deprivation). Prayers were said to boost the private supply of grace. Saying the rosary earned an indulgence of specified days spared in purgatory (if the rosary was a properly blessed one). Indulgences could be earned by going to certain churches on certain feasts (some would pop in and out repeatedly to rack up a larger number). The clergy manned a hydraulic system pumping grace back into souls, or measuring its flow to this or that good cause.

“The respected Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, asked why the Holy Spirit, continually referred to and invoked in the early history of the church, became a kind of forgotten person of the Trinity in more recent times. He suggests that there has been a substitution of human agencies for the free action of the Divinity. Instead of the presence of the Spirit, breathing where it will, in the interaction of the Father with the Son in His body, grace is made a stuff controlled by a papal system of spiritual aqueducts and storage tanks. In a new form of idolatry, the Pope becomes a substitute for the Spirit.” (pp.174,175)

But Wills is worse than Voltaire. Voltaire attacked St. Joan of Arc, but Wills attacks Our Blessed Lady:

“...A kind of competitive chivalry, as in courtly love, made men pay Mary escalating compliments. She was not only the highest of humans, according to Peter Damien (eleventh century), she was greater than the angels - taking her even further out of reach as a model for other women.

“Not even that was praise enough...The inflation of titles was rationalized by Duns Scotus (fourteenth century) with his maximalist principle of Marian dignities: any privilege her son *could* give her he *would* give her. (Wouldn't any good son?) What was possible with her was plausible; and if it was plausible it was performed. *Potuit, deuit, fecit...*

“The early doctrines of Marian glory clarified the character of the Incarnation and were centered on Mary's son. This doctrine [the Immaculate Conception] would muddy and confuse the nature of the Incarnation. Exemption from the historic condition would make Mary superhuman. It would also make it hard to explain why she suffered the effects of original sin (pain, fatigue, death) without having contracted original sin. Jesus could suffer in his human nature because he had a divine nature. A parallel with Mary would give her a divine nature...

“When the Reformation came, this idol-goddess was razed from her side doors by the iconoclasts...” (pp.210,211)

When Voltaire was dying he was filled with a superstitious dread of being, as he put it, “buried under the common highway.” Since he was excommunicated for being a Mason, he couldn't be buried in consecrated ground. At the last minute he sent for a priest. I doubt if Wills, with his Protestant notions of the priesthood and the sacraments, will be able to do the same.

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References

1 Sister Catherine, M.I.C.M., *Our Glorious Popes*, Loreto Publications, P.O. Box 603, Fitzwilliam, NH, 03447, 2000, p.207.

2 Wills refers to Pope Pius IX as “the kidnapper of Edgardo Mortara.” (pp.40-44) This famous case can only be understood against the background of the Church’s teaching on the Jews. In order to be saved a Jew has to believe in Jesus Christ and be baptized. Edgardo a little Jewish boy in Bologna had been secretly baptized by a Catholic servant, when he was sick and in danger of death. But Edgardo recovered, and the Catholic girl then told the officials what she had done. Bologna at that time was part of the Papal States, and when Pius IX heard the story, it was clear to him what had to be done; the boy must be brought up a Catholic. Edgardo was brought to Rome and he and the Holy Father became very fond of one another. When his Jewish parents visited Edgardo in Rome, his mother tore off a Mary medal he was wearing. Edgardo remained in Rome, went to Catholic schools, and eventually became a priest. Of course all this was accompanied by howls from the press.

A somewhat similar case happened in Boston in the early 50s. A poor Catholic girl had a baby out of wedlock, and in a panic she put her little girl up for adoption. The girl was adopted by a Jewish couple. The Catholic girl later was married in the Church, and tried to regain custody of her child, since she was so distraught at the time she didn’t realize what she was doing. The Jewish couple announced that they intended to bring the girl up Jewish. The then Archbishop Cushing, who was a great friend of the Jews, in this case acted from the grace of his office. He made a public statement that the little girl should be returned to her mother. The Jewish couple fled to Miami, and when the Massachusetts court tried to extradite the couple, a Jewish judge in Miami refused to comply. I happened to be bookselling in New York City at the time, and the headlines screamed triumphantly: **HILDY CAN STAY.**
