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3-2002

## Papal Sin: Structures Of Deceit, by Gary Wills

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### Recommended Citation

Coppola, David L. "Papal Sin: Structures Of Deceit." *Catholic Education: A Journal Of Inquiry & Practice* 5.3 (2002): 407-409.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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GERALD CATTARO

*Fordham University*

### PAPAL SIN: STRUCTURES OF DECEIT

GARY WILLS, DOUBLEDAY, 2000.

*Reviewed by David Coppola*

Gary Wills begins his book *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit* by reminding readers that it is a “healthy habit” to remember that all people—even popes—are imperfect and sinners. This sounds a bit glib and commonplace unless one remembers to take the implications of this statement seriously. Wills is as serious as a steel sword. He takes sweeping strokes at who and what he considers to be adversaries of the truth—not the egregious characters of the past, but recent papal practices and pronouncements, which he believes have eroded the Church’s moral authority.

With the subtlety of a sword, Wills holds up the shiny idealistic blades of Augustine and Newman and dissects the past two centuries of papal history, where he contends there is considerable evidence of a “structure of deceit.” This is not a dispassionate analysis by a disinterested observer. He describes a papacy that appears to be unwilling and unable to face the truth about itself and its past. Wills believes that the Catholic Church has continued to perform various “sinful” acts because to do otherwise would necessitate admitting to wrongdoing in the past, something he contends the Church is now structurally incapable of doing. He outlines what he considers the sin in structures and leaders.

The first section of the 21-chapter book, “Historical Dishonesties,” discusses the Holocaust. Wills asserts that there have been papal attempts to usurp the Holocaust as well as actions attempting to cover up any Catholic complicity in it. He begins with an analysis of “We Remember: A Reflection on the *Shoah*,” the document on the Holocaust issued in 1998 after 11 years of preparation by the Pontifical Commission on Religious Relations With the Jews. In the document, according to Wills, the Church seems for a moment ready to repent, only to finish by blaming someone else, which he sees as a consistent pattern of behavior. According to Wills’ reading, even the recent canonization of Edith Stein resulted from the Vatican’s determination to find in her a Catholic victim of the Holocaust.

It would be foolish to deny the extremely troubled history between Jews

and Christians over the past 2,000 years. Before 1965, when the Catholic bishops of the world voted to approve the shortest and most controversial document of Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, which addressed the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, it was not uncommon for Christian churches to advocate teachings of contempt toward Jews and reduce Judaism to an antiquated or outmoded religion that had been replaced and superseded by Christianity. *Nostra Aetate* was the first of many documents, including "We Remember," and as difficult and painful as it is for religions to admit failures and to correct inherited traditions, this Pope's track record has been excellent. In the year 2000 alone, the Pope asked forgiveness for the past and present faults of the sons and daughters of the Church—especially against the people of Israel (March 12) and visited the Holy Land (March 20-26). The sustained willingness of the Church through John Paul II to continue to refine her understandings and teachings is another striking example that seems to dispute, particularly on this charge, Wills' assertions.

The next and longest section of the book, "Doctrinal Dishonesties," focuses on the history leading up to *Humanae Vitae* and the disillusionment afterwards. Wills analyzes and dismisses as "Biblical fundamentalism" the Vatican's reasons why women cannot be priests and the teaching on obligatory celibacy for priests. The latter he believes has increased disproportionately the number of gays in the priesthood, which causes gay priests to live a lie. He also contends that forced celibacy has contributed to a conspiracy of silence and lies that have covered up sexual abuse by clergy. He claims that many priests are involved in emotional and sexual relationships with women that they cannot sustain. At one point, Wills seems to swipe clumsily at the issue of abortion, questioning the Vatican's assertion that life and ensoulment begin at conception. But he admits that abortion is never the best alternative and it should be avoided by use of birth control.

In the third and fourth sections, Wills discusses Vatican I and Pope Pius IX's role in promoting the teaching on papal infallibility. He also points to the growing appreciation for the importance of historical documents in the pursuit of truth. Wills concludes the book by pointing to some great truth-tellers of the Catholic tradition: St. Augustine, John Henry Newman, John Acton, and John XXIII. In their spirit, Wills believes the sword of truth can strike out against the actions of the past 150 years and into a future of hope.

Wills has spoken his truth and offers arguments to illustrate where he believes the Vatican has deliberately moved the Church in directions that are unreasonable and in contradiction to the Biblical tradition. His range of intelligence is challenging and engaging. Unfortunately, his arguments tend to run on and are a bit repetitive, and he occasionally ascribes unsubstantiated motives to events or documents and loses focus with his pet grievances. He has flares of passion and barely manages to contain the flame in the scholar's forge of extensive references.

As Catholic educators and people of faith, we have a right and a duty to pursue the truth, who is Christ. There is a traditional distinction between the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ or as Sacrament, which is distinguished from the sinful impulses and poor behavior of some of its members. We can all learn from this book the need to speak truth with love and to take responsibility for our actions. Like steel to the stone, this is a challenging read that is sure to spark conversation about Church, leadership, and our role as educators. We will undoubtedly need to continue this discussion to clear the path for God's Word to be seen in all its brilliance.

*Dr. David Coppola is the Director of Conferences and Publications at the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.*

## **SCHOOLS, VOUCHERS, AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC**

TERRY M. MOE, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS, 2001.

*Reviewed by Salvatore Ferrera*

A greater service to the voucher movement could not be rendered than Terry Moe's *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*, which proves that vouchers and public education can not only co-exist, but also co-prosper. Rather than depicting public education and vouchers as mutually hostile, the author makes much of the accurate perception that the American public, across each and every ethnic and racial boundary, like both public schools and vouchers. And the author documents this news with a broad-based, national survey.

Inherent in the analysis is the realization that former voucher advocates stressed the economic forces of the educational marketplace and, by doing so, raised hackles and built barricades, when both were unnecessary. Rather than belabor the market mechanism, voucher advocates should stress benefits to those parts of the school population clearly underserved by the educational system. These parts include minorities and inner city students.

The author's breadth of analysis is far reaching. Not only are poll results used, but polls are analyzed across perceptive, if sometimes delicate, fault lines of race, ethnicity, religion, and income. This type of analysis knocks the wind out of the usual rich versus poor, Black versus White, and educated versus uneducated punching bags automatically strung up across the gym of public opinion.

The author's call for a nationwide voucher initiative is blessed with good methodology, better results, and a keen analysis of political trends. Moreover, he covers his subject in 10 well-written chapters, neatly tied together in a

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