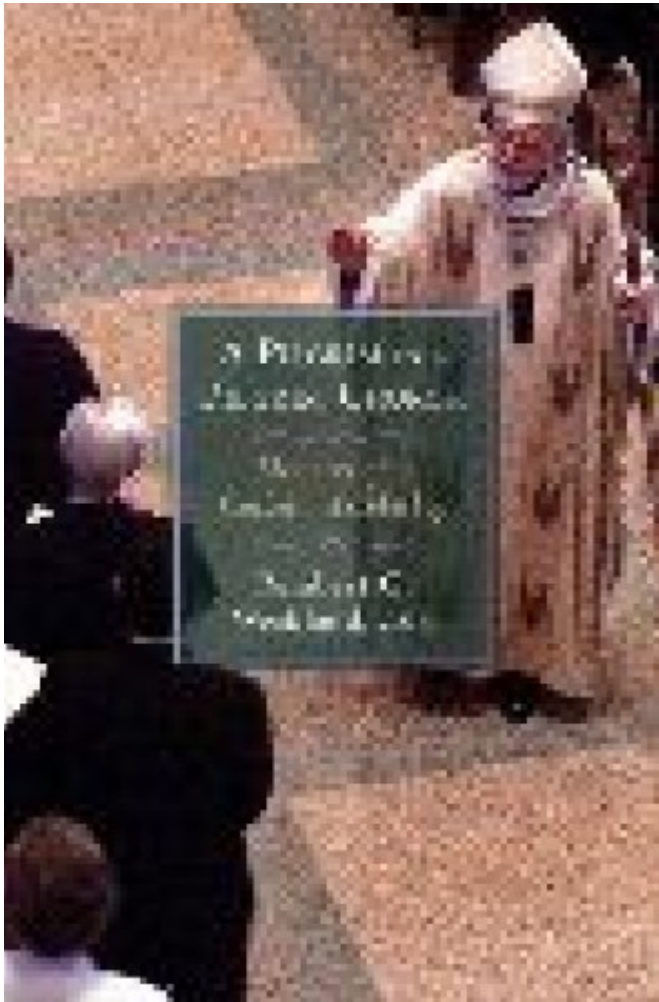


A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop

reviewed by [Tom Roberts](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

In Review



A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop

Rembert G. Weakland, O.S.B.
Eerdmans

In May 2002, Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee was outed as homosexual by Paul Marcoux, a man he had fallen in love with some two decades earlier and with whom he had a limited affair. Marcoux was in his early 30s when they first met.

In the reporting atmosphere of 2002, the year in which the depth of the Roman Catholic sex abuse crisis in Boston was disclosed, the Weakland case added intriguing twists to the seemingly endless saga of errant Catholic clergy. Weakland was a larger and more interesting target than most because he had been an influential and high-profile bishop for a quarter of a century. He had been a standard bearer for progressive causes, including the call for more consultation between different levels of leadership in the church and for more participation by laypeople, especially women, in positions of responsibility in the church. Weakland had openly questioned the prohibition against ordaining women and had once written publicly that as a way of addressing the growing priest shortage, he would advance the name of a married man for the priesthood (knowing that the strategy had little chance of success).

Though Weakland denied he ever abused anyone, he admitted in a 2002 speech to his archdiocese, in which he sought forgiveness, “the inappropriate nature” of his relationship with Marcoux. In his memoir, he provides no further details of the relationship and doesn’t mention an emotional 14-page letter he wrote in 1980 in which he spoke both of his love for Marcoux and of his return to celibacy. He does, however, provide the frankest discussion of homosexual orientation that one is likely to hear from a Catholic bishop.

Perhaps as egregious an offense as his sexual indiscretion was the secret \$450,000 payment he made to Marcoux to buy his silence. Weakland’s claim that the settlement money did not come from any funds designated for charitable or pastoral work comes as small consolation to Catholics who expect greater accountability from their leaders. What would be termed embezzlement in the secular world was merely an injudicious act in the world of Catholic hierarchy. The archbishop also claimed at the time that the money he had given the archdiocese from honoraria and other fees exceeded the amount of the settlement—a claim that in the book he acknowledges, to his “continued embarrassment,” was not true. So he has pledged to continue giving what he can annually to the archdiocese for the rest of his life.

The day after Marcoux made his public revelations on ABC's *Good Morning America*, the Vatican accepted Weakland's resignation, which he had already submitted on his 75th birthday the previous month.

Thus ended—in ignominy and in the glare of the 24/7 news cycle—the career of one of the more interesting episcopal figures in modern U.S. Catholic Church history. Sad as the events are, they occasioned the publication of this book, so some good has already come of them.

Weakland was a man of brilliance and naïveté. His brilliance was recognized early by his peers, who voted him at young ages to positions of increasing responsibility and influence within the Benedictine order. It was also recognized by Pope Paul VI, who appointed him archbishop. His naïveté, self-admitted over matters of sex generally and certainly over his association with Marcoux, would eventually compromise his legacy. He was deeply committed to the reforms enacted at Vatican II, yet reverted to a preconiliar sense of privilege and hierarchical secrecy when his career and reputation were threatened.

Weakland rose from very poor circumstances in Patton, Pennsylvania, to leadership of the worldwide Benedictine order, a station that afforded him travel to all parts of the globe. He had extraordinary musical talent and went on to earn degrees from Juilliard and Columbia University. He became the archbishop who led the U.S. hierarchy in fashioning the 1986 pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All,” a major pronouncement that challenged many presumptions of American capitalism, deeming them out of step with church social teaching.

Through Weakland's memoir the reader enters into the details of his life as a monk in the 1950s, as head of the Benedictine order in the 1960s and 1970s, and finally as a bishop during the long pontificate of John Paul II. His ten years in Rome, beginning in 1967, as abbot primate of the worldwide Benedictine order gave him an unusually close view of Vatican operations in the immediate postconciliar period. He developed a warm personal relationship with Pope Paul VI, and in his visits to Benedictine monasteries he witnessed firsthand how the church was emerging throughout the world in the period following Vatican II.

The lasting value of Weakland's memoir lies in his account of deep opposition to Vatican II reforms on the part of much of the curia, the governing apparatus in the Vatican. He connects specific names, memos and conversations to efforts to

sabotage any momentum for change—efforts begun before the ink was dry on the council documents.

In his own conflicts with Vatican bureaucrats over such issues as how the Benedictines should pray the daily office, he could always count on support from Paul VI. The understanding between himself and the pope regarding the changes that flowed from the council was often a source of reassurance and confidence for the abbot primate.

Things changed dramatically with the election in 1978 of John Paul II, who prized loyalty and obedience, not give and take. He was apparently determined to restore absolute authority to the papacy and tolerated no interference. Weakland's meetings with him were brief and perfunctory. As the archbishop recalls, John Paul never looked him in the eye and often just grunted in response to points made.

Weakland is deeply critical of John Paul's handling of internal church matters. He sees his papacy as one of retrenchment and centralization, which cut off the spirit of collegiality that had begun to spread in the church. And on the home front, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was transformed. A group that once wrote compelling documents on the economy and on the morality of nuclear weapons was so severely restricted by John Paul's new rules that it has never since been able to undertake those kinds of broadly consultative efforts.

Weakland faults Paul VI for trying to maintain a balance of thought and opinion in his curial appointments, keeping in place some he knew would oppose his ideas for implementing Vatican II. It was his way, Weakland writes, of appeasing conservatives who disagreed with the conclusions of the council. In Weakland's view, the strategy was deeply flawed and guaranteed that the reforms of the council would never be able to take root.

By contrast, John Paul II brooked no dissent or disagreement. "What surprised me most," writes Weakland, "was his intolerance of views opposed to his own, especially among theologians, the force with which he reacted to suppress them, and the secrecy of the procedures." In his required visits to the Vatican, Weakland also realized that John Paul gave considerable credence to conservative critics of the church's leaders in the United States, who would flood the Vatican offices with complaints. The archbishop from Milwaukee was regularly met by curial officials bearing stacks of clips from the city's newspaper and texts of articles that he had

written.

The tension at the heart of Weakland's experience is the perennial battle, more explosive in some eras than others, over the extent of hierarchical teaching authority in the Catholic Church. That authority, he writes, is at once "our strongest asset" and "our most burdensome and most confounding belief."

His memoir ends with a kind of penitential rite for Catholics in which he squarely places himself among the penitents. He sees in the future a need for the church to shed its arrogance, to put aside the notion that it somehow represents the perfect society, to rid itself of the inclination to quickly blame others for its internal problems, and to use methods other than condemnation and "near-infallible" statements to deal with disagreements within the church.

Perhaps the church, having survived a period of public corporate embarrassment, will emerge a humbler institution. Whether or not that comes to pass, Weakland says that having lived through his own public mortification, he is now at peace.