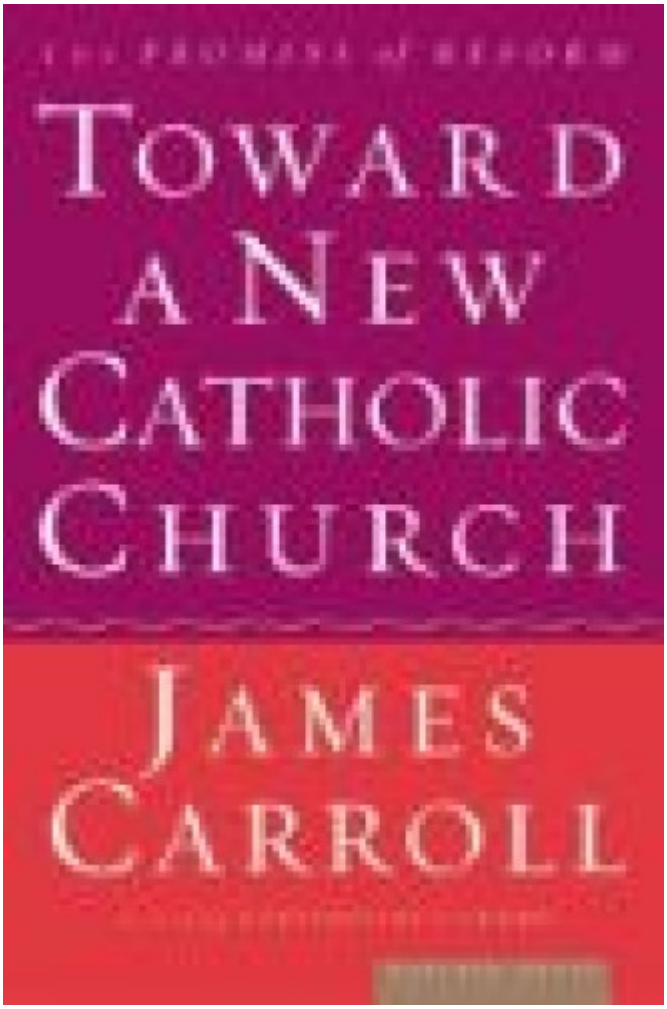
Tomorrow’s Catholics

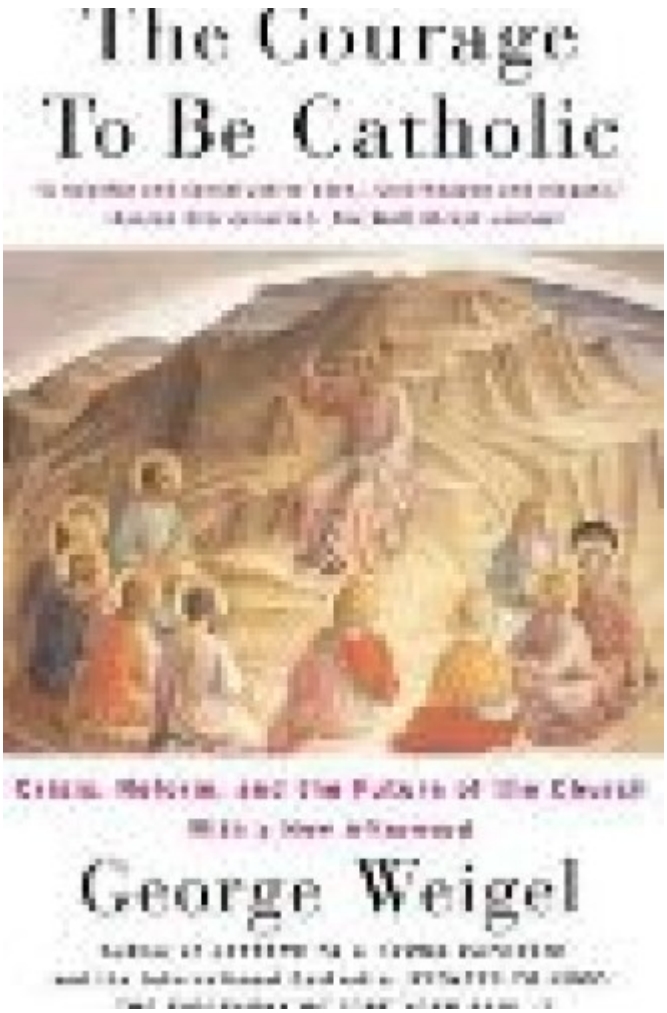
By Christopher J. Ruddy in the January 25, 2003 issue

In Review



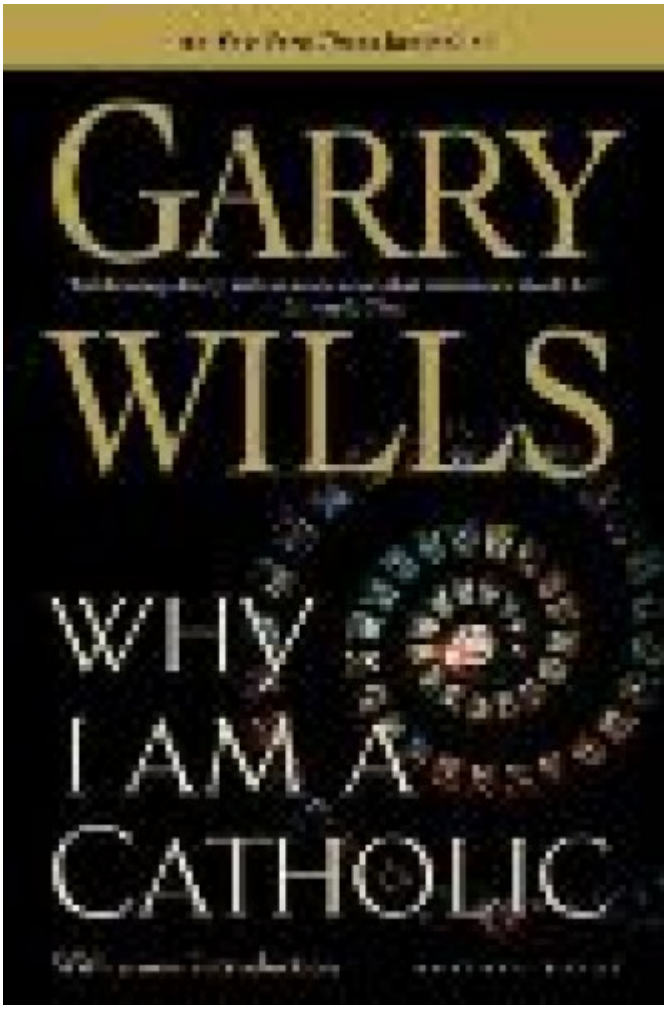
Toward a New Catholic Church: The Promise of Reform

James Carroll
Mariner



The Courage to Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church

George Weigel
Basic Books



Why I am A Catholic

Garry Wills
Houghton Mifflin

"The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Though William Faulkner did not have the Catholic sexual-abuse crisis in mind when he wrote these words, they do throw light on the conflicting responses to the scandals of the past year. While most commentators agree that there really are two scandals—clerical sexual abuse itself and the subsequent episcopal dereliction—they differ on their diagnoses of both the causes and the appropriate remedies. Some attribute the crisis in part to a centuries-old repressive sexual ethic, while others indict the church’s ambiguous and permissive moral teaching of recent decades. Some hold that numerous bishops have failed because of their complicity in corrupt ecclesial structures, while others believe that these leaders lacked the courage to teach unpopular truths and to govern their own dioceses.

Such divergent responses to the crisis are unintelligible unless one sees them as part of the deeper issue of what might be called American Catholicism's "culture wars." Over the past 40 years, since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Catholic Church in the U.S. has become increasingly divided over liturgy, theology, catechesis, ministry, sexuality and a host of other issues. If, as priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley argues, such polarization has little affect on the average Catholic, it does profoundly afflict ministerial, theological and cultural elites within the church. It has become impossible not to pigeonhole leaders and thinkers: Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles is a "progressive"; Cardinal Francis George of Chicago a "traditionalist"; Notre Dame theologian Richard McBrien a "liberal"; *First Things* editor Richard John Neuhaus a "conservative."

The polarization is so deep that when, in 1996, the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Bernardin founded the Catholic Common Ground Initiative as a means of addressing division in the church, he was criticized by some liberal Catholics who thought that the project was not radical enough and by some of his brother cardinals who believed that it jeopardized the essential truths of the faith.

James Carroll, George Weigel and Garry Wills all agree that the sexual-abuse crisis is symptomatic of a deeper cultural war in Catholicism, but they differ—often diametrically—on what is at stake. Carroll, a novelist and former priest who won a National Book Award for his memoir *An American Requiem*, offers the slimmest tome of the three. A lightly edited version of the concluding section of his 2001 book *Constantine's Sword*, it calls for a Vatican III which will bring about "full democratic reform." This reform will enable Catholicism to reject anti-Semitism, triumphalist and exclusivist conceptions of Christ and the church, and puritanical notions of sexuality.

Garry Wills, a Pulitzer Prize winner for *Lincoln at Gettysburg* and the author of *Papal Sin*: *Structures of Deceit*, focuses on the charism of the Petrine ministry of church unity and the papacy's frequent self-aggrandizement throughout the centuries. George Weigel, best known for *Witness to Hope*, his massive and massively successful biography of Pope John Paul II, is the only one of the three whose book specifically responds to the sexual-abuse crisis. He argues that Catholicism needs a renewal of holiness, and that only the saints formed by such a renewal can reform the priesthood, the episcopate and the entire church through their courageous embrace of the fullness of Catholic truth and tradition.

For each writer, the past is very much present in American Catholicism in the form of three decisive years: the 1965 conclusion of Vatican II; the 1968 release of *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life"), Pope Paul VI's encyclical which banned artificial contraception; and the 1978 election of Pope John Paul II.

Vatican II is the decisive event of modern Catholicism. Convoked by Pope John XXIII, the council engaged in a twofold movement of *ressourcement* (a return to the often-neglected sources of the Christian tradition) and *aggiornamento* (an updating of the church's life and doctrine in response to the times). In both its 16 documents and its overall experience of communion and collegiality, the council effected the first comprehensive reform of Catholicism since the 16th-century Council of Trent. Nearly 40 years after the close of Vatican II, significant differences remain in how the achievements of the council are interpreted and in its reception in the life of the church. How one views the council is therefore a Rorschach test for one's understanding of the church and its reform.

Devoting several chapters to Vatican II and its aftermath, Wills locates the council's fundamental achievement in its conception of the church as the "people of God" in which the laity and hierarchy are equal in their baptismal dignity. The council also led to a renewal of the liturgy, an affirmation of religious freedom and the primacy of conscience, a rejection of church-state unions, an openness to the truth of other religions (especially Judaism) and a renewed sense that the church's teaching authority resides in all of the faithful, not exclusively in the hierarchy.

More broadly, Wills sees the "spirit" of Vatican II in the church's rejection of the "mystique of changelessness" and in its consequent "opening of the windows" to the world; Catholicism must look outward, not inward. The church, according to Pope John's opening address to the council, ought to serve the world with the "medicine of mercy," rather than condemn it with the "medicine of severity."

Carroll largely agrees with Wills on the concrete achievements of the council—especially its affirmation of the equal dignity of the entire people of God and its view of Judaism—but goes still further in interpreting its "spirit." Above all, the council addressed the gaps in life and thought that had developed between a largely medieval, defensive Catholicism and the modern world. It ended the church's self-destructive revolt against modernity and declared a truce not simply with the world, but also within itself. Second, the council rejected the "imperial autocracy" that had reached its doctrinal apex in Vatican I's 1870 definition of papal infallibility

and its organizational apex in the “bureaucratized misanthropy” of modern Catholicism. Because Vatican II’s work was incomplete, a Vatican III is needed. But Vatican II nonetheless opened the door for a future affirmation of the radical equality of all people in the church and in the world.

If Carroll sees Vatican II as a move toward the “holiness of democracy,” Weigel sees it as proclaiming the “democracy of holiness.” Whereas Carroll and Wills focus on the ecclesial aspects of the council’s labors, Weigel emphasizes its evangelical and anthropological dimensions. Vatican II, in his view, inaugurated a two-way dialogue in which Catholicism not only listened to the world’s hopes and anxieties but also proposed to the world a Christian humanism: the “passionate love of God for all humanity, made visible in . . . Jesus Christ, crucified and risen,” that same Christ who fully and uniquely reveals to humanity its incomparable dignity and high calling. Accordingly, while the council made decisive advances in such areas as liturgy and religious freedom, its primary achievement was renewing the church’s mission to proclaim to all humanity the good news that Christ is the source of true freedom and life. Too many Catholics, mostly liberals but also some conservatives, have failed to grasp this evangelical core, Weigel argues, and so have remained fixated on internal church reform.

If all three writers agree on the decisive importance—if not the meaning—of Vatican II, so too with the events of 1968, a revolutionary, traumatic year for the church and the world. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, as well as the student demonstrations in Europe and the escalation of the Vietnam War, seemed to mark the disintegration of Western society. And the sexual revolution went into overdrive, leading to further upheaval in North America and Western Europe.

That year also signaled the end of the Vatican II honeymoon in Catholicism. The theological and ecclesial fault lines that had begun to surface within the conciliar majority (as opposed to a more conservative and Roman minority) toward the end of the council now appeared in full view. Several of the council’s most influential and progressive theologians—most prominently Henri de Lubac and Joseph Ratzinger—challenged appeals to the “spirit” of Vatican II that seemed far removed from the documents and the intentions of the council. Much of what passed as conciliar-inspired church reform, they argued, was an accommodation to the world and a betrayal of the church’s identity.

More visibly, the release of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* rocked the American church, leading to unprecedented public dissent. In upholding the prohibition against artificial methods of birth control, the encyclical dashed the hopes of many believers for a change in church teaching—hopes that had been raised when the *National Catholic Reporter* leaked the news that the lay and clerical members of the hand-picked papal commission studying the matter had voted decisively to support the limited use of artificial contraception within the context of marriage.

Disappointment was inevitable, but its magnitude was astonishing. Hundreds of Catholic theologians (including ethicist Charles Curran, whose permission to teach as a Catholic theologian Rome would later rescind) signed a public statement that questioned the teaching. Financial contributions and church attendance dropped precipitously. Wounded by the outcry, Pope Paul never wrote another encyclical. The American church entered into an acrimony that still lingers.

Carroll experienced the conflict both personally and institutionally. Marred by the "ideology of papal absolutism," *Humanae Vitae* was for him part of Pope Paul's effort to "turn back the tide" of church reform begun by Vatican II. Ordained to the priesthood only a few months after the encyclical's release, Carroll could not in good conscience accept the growing disjunction between the church's official teaching and the lived reality of many Catholics, he states. He resigned the priesthood in 1973 and married soon thereafter.

Wills's comments on *Humanae Vitae* lack Carroll's autobiographical bent but far exceed him in scorn. In *Papal Sin*, Wills described the encyclical as "the most crippling, puzzling blow to organized Catholicism in our time" and the "most disastrous papal document of this century"; the text and its drafting exemplified Catholicism's hierarchical subterfuge and intellectual dishonesty. *Why I Am a Catholic* presents the encyclical as the "great break" between most Catholics and the Vatican, for it opened the way for "qualified and loyal theologians" to dissent from church teaching and emboldened the laity to follow their consciences. No longer would Catholics, "on entering church, have to check our brains at the door" or "suspend our common sense or honesty" when faced with "silly" teaching. If not always able to cite Vatican II's documents "chapter and verse," these newly empowered faithful nonetheless seek to be faithful to the "spirit of the council"—that "opening of windows" fundamental to *aggiornamento*.

Vatican II indeed opened the windows to the world, Weigel agrees, but just at the moment when modernity “barrel[ed] into a dark tunnel full of poisonous fumes.” The sexual revolution, a suspicion of institutions and authority, and intellectual nihilism combined in a corrosive mix. When coupled with a postconciliar euphoria in which people forgot that Vatican II intended a two-way dialogue between church and world, the result was ecclesial chaos.

This chaos erupted, according to Weigel, with the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. Faced with the public dissent of 19 Washington priests, Cardinal Patrick O’Boyle disciplined them, even removing some from active ministry. They appealed to Rome, and in 1971 the Vatican allowed them to return to ministry without an explicit rejection of their dissent. Pope Paul VI feared that a crackdown on the priests might lead to schism. While not budging on the truth of the encyclical, he decided to tolerate dissent for the sake of ecclesial unity.

This “Truce of 1968,” as Weigel calls it, affected three groups. Theologians and priests learned that their dissent from magisterial teaching would bring few negative consequences. Bishops learned that their efforts to control dissent would receive little support from Rome. Some bishops even felt free themselves to dissent—however implicitly—from church teaching. Finally, the laity, observing the conduct of these first two groups, began to think that everything was up for grabs.

Often with an appeal to an amorphous “spirit of Vatican II,” priests, bishops and laity alike contributed to a “culture of dissent.” The sexual-abuse crisis—grounded in heterodox sexual morality and unchecked by cowed bishops—began to develop slowly but surely. What Weigel calls “Catholic Lite”—a softening of orthodoxy under the guise of reform—began its ascendancy, and led to the malaise and indecision of the 1970s.

The election of Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyla to the papacy was a revolution for the church and the world. The first non-Italian pope in 455 years, John Paul II has become a figure of world-historical importance, having played a pivotal role in the fall of communism. Within Catholicism he is universally admired for his personal holiness and his service of the gospel. Among modern popes, he is rivaled only by John XXIII in terms of popular affection and historical significance.

Yet Catholic elites are deeply divided over his still-unfinished legacy. Some see in him courage in the face of a corrupt, brutal modernity; others see intransigence and

incomprehension. Some see a crabbed sexual moralist; others see a herald of true sexual fulfillment. Some find authoritative leadership; others find authoritarianism. At the root of these stark differences is a central question: Does John Paul's pontificate represent renewal or restoration? That is, is it the flowering of Vatican II's hopeful vision or a return to the defensive triumphalism of the preconciliar era?

Weigel does not hesitate to state that the present pope may someday be known as "John Paul the Great," particularly for his unstinting defense of human dignity in the face of political and cultural barbarisms. He emphasizes that the heart of John Paul's pontificate is his evangelism and Christian humanism. More a poet and preacher than a bureaucrat, John Paul has, in Weigel's words, one central theme: in Christ, "you are greater than you imagine, and greater than the late modern world has let you imagine."

Far from trying to repeal Vatican II, as many of his critics hold, John Paul has instead affirmed the council's key insights into Christ and humanity. Thus he has refused to let the implementation of Vatican II devolve into ecclesial power struggles (e.g., between the pope and the bishops, or between the hierarchy and the laity). When combined with his "theology of the body"—a celebratory presentation of human embodiment and sexuality—John Paul's promotion of Vatican II's reforms provides crucial resources for responding to the American sexual-abuse crisis—a crisis, Wills argues, rooted in defective conceptions of the Catholic Church and its sexual teaching.

Carroll and Wills acknowledge John Paul's intellectual, spiritual and social gifts; "charismatic," he is full of "charm" and "energy." They also note his courageous support for the Solidarity movement in communist Poland, and Carroll makes special mention of his rapprochement with Judaism. But such praise seems grudging, even backhanded, in light of their severe criticism. Calling John Paul a "reactionary," Carroll condemns what he sees as the pope's program of "medieval restoration" and its attempted repeal of Vatican II.

Wills offers a lengthier indictment. John Paul is apocalyptic, obsessed with martyrdom and with the Virgin Mary, and, worst of all, self-important: "The pope himself seems to think the whole church depends on him—on his being saved by the Virgin of Fatima, on his living into the new millennium, on his visiting every Marian shrine, on his Stakhanovite canonizing, on his redefinitions of every truth, on his creating a like-minded episcopate. . . . This one-man rescue operation is a

staggering assignment," he writes.

If Wills is critical of John Paul, he is contemptuous of Cardinal Ratzinger, John Paul's chief aide and head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Wills charges Ratzinger with reversing Vatican II's teachings (and his own earlier writings) on episcopal collegiality, the church as the "people of God," the liturgy, intellectual freedom and ecumenism. Together John Paul and Ratzinger have mounted a "coup" to repeal virtually all of the major advances of the council. This coup has failed, Wills writes, for the Catholic people have rejected it. They have instead shown their love for John Paul by not abandoning him in his errant ways; they support him precisely through their loyal opposition and their faithfulness to Vatican II. Neither "monstrous" nor "misguided," John Paul has been a "well-meaning" failure. "Papal rebirth," Wills concludes, will come from "John [XXIII]'s church, not John Paul's."

If this is Catholicism's recent past, then what of its present and future? What is one to make of Carroll's, Weigel's and Wills's calls for church reform? How well do they address problems raised by the clerical sexual-abuse crisis, as well as by the polarization of the Catholic culture wars?

Carroll's call for Vatican III is thoroughly flawed. The reformed Catholicism he envisions has little connection to the church and to the conception of Christ as they have existed across the centuries. His opening chapter "What Is to Be Done?"—the only substantively new part of his book—ranges from religious fundamentalism to Middle Eastern politics to the sexual-abuse crisis, yet it mentions Jesus Christ only once. Here and throughout the book Carroll gives us neither the Christ of scripture and the creeds nor the church that fostered them.

Carroll's vision of church reform, then, lacks a Christic center. His effort to address the Jewish-Christian division, for instance, reduces the split to a tragic historical misunderstanding and blurs the theological differences between the two faiths. In the same vein, his desire to affirm the value of religious pluralism is based on an agnosticism about divine revelation, and leads to an evisceration of belief in Christ's unique salvific role, especially in relation to the cross: "It is impossible to reconcile this Christology, these cosmic claims for the accomplishment of Jesus Christ as the one source of salvation, with authentic respect for Judaism and every other 'spiritual neighbor,'" he writes.

Carroll's preference for Jesus as Revealer rather than as Savior turns Jesus into a mere moral exemplar—the same fatal move liberal Protestantism made at the turn of the 20th century. In short, *Toward a New Catholic Church* is a dying gasp from a branch of liberal Catholicism that has never really left the 1960s and that grows grayer by the year. It is, in Weigel's phrase, "Catholicism Lite," and the reform it promises leads to dissolution, not to the fruition of Vatican II.

Wills's work is more intelligent and substantial than Carroll's, and he writes from a deep faith; he notes, not without pride, that he prays the Rosary daily and recites the Lord's Prayer in Greek. His chapter on the apostle Peter's importance for early Christianity is an incisive, eloquent defense of Catholicism's inclusivity against the exclusivity of Gnosticism and other heresies. He also makes, at the end of his lengthy account of the papacy's failings, an appealing, if brief, case for reform within—not apart from—the church: "I prefer the company of Ignatius of Loyola to that of Luther, or Charles Borromeo to Calvin, Philip Neri to Melanchthon," he writes.

Wills's argument is nonetheless marred by serious errors of fact and interpretation. Boston College theologian Francis Sullivan, for one, has exposed Wills's manipulative, dishonest summary of Cardinal Ratzinger's views on ecumenism and interreligious relations. It is a cruel irony that an author so self-consciously devoted to truth-telling in the church is sometimes himself so free with the truth. Moreover, how can Wills's unrelenting critique nourish those—especially the young—who haven't yet eaten the solid food of trust and generosity (as he himself fruitfully did in his youth)? His concluding handful of pages on the positive achievements of the papacy may well seem hollow to those who have plowed through hundreds of carping ones on its shortcomings.

In *True and False Reform in the Church* (a seminal 1950 work disappointingly never mentioned in any of the books under review), the Catholic theologian Yves Congar argued that the first condition for genuine church reform was charity—*caritas*, that selfless, unsentimental love that wills only the good of the other. Wills often makes little effort to understand the legitimate—even if misguided or wrongheaded—concerns of his opponents, preferring to ascribe to them the worst of motives. Such utter lack of charity for those with whom he disagrees—especially Ratzinger—cannot build up the church he professes to love. Does he really heed Ephesians' counsel to "speak the truth in love"? Although "structures of deceit" do exist in the church (if not as pervasively as Wills asserts), all efforts to expose them and reform the church will founder if they lack love.

Weigel, for his part, makes a valid—if unnuanced—point about the failure of the Catholic "Lite Brigade" to reproduce itself in subsequent generations. Even if younger Catholics are far from unanimous in their support of Weigel's positions, they nonetheless are not consumed by the theological and ecclesial power-struggles that have afflicted the American church for the past 40 years. I think, for instance, of the "New Wineskins" project at Notre Dame, where advanced graduate students and untenured professors from various institutions gathered this past summer to discuss issues facing Catholic moral theology. The participants represented a variety of educational and intellectual backgrounds, yet were able to avoid the ideological labeling (e.g., "sectarianism" vs. "Constantinianism," "virtue ethics" vs. "casuistry") that often plagues older ethicists. Younger Catholic systematic theologians are likewise moving past the strife between Rahnerians and Balthasarians that has paralyzed many systematicians in their 50s and beyond.

Weigel fails, though, to prove his central thesis: that there is a link between the "Truce of 1968" and the clerical sexual-abuse crisis. One can admit that a "culture of dissent"—or a "school of resentment," as it has also been described—does exist, and that the "adventure of orthodoxy" is needed always. However, he refuses even to acknowledge that the widespread rejection of *Humanae Vitae's* teaching on artificial contraception—the supposed origin of the "culture of dissent"—may have been grounded in something other than systematic dissent or cultural dissolution. By failing to admit that many of those who rejected such teaching did so with integrity, he reduces a complex situation to a simplistic calculus of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Furthermore, the two most notorious pedophiles, Boston priests John Geoghan and Paul Shanley, trained at the same pre-Vatican II seminary and began their abuse before 1968, and many of the bishops at the center of the scandals—Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston and Cardinal Edward Egan of New York come to mind—are not known for doctrinal or disciplinary laxity. Cardinal Law, in fact, first proposed the creation of 1992's Catechism of the Catholic Church. At the eye of the storm, then, no "culture of dissent" exists, and Weigel's claims on that score are tendentious at best.

The present crisis in American Catholicism, I judge, is less one of dissent or duplicity than of distance. Notre Dame theologian John Cavadini has written that the only way to explain many bishops' inattention to the victims of sexual abuse and to their families, short of ascribing active malice, is by understanding the distance fostered by clericalism. Such distance, he contends, means the church has "no sense that

these are our children," but rather sees them as "your children, those of the laity, whose duty is to listen and submit." Bishops failed, then, not primarily by acquiescing to sexual perversity but by privileging their institutions and reputations over their people. This failure to communicate, to sympathize with another's plight, to assume the good intentions of their people and treat them as equals, is precisely the problem of polarization.

Thus, while Weigel rightly stresses holiness as the key to ecclesial and episcopal renewal (a point made half a century earlier by Congar), his conception of holiness may exacerbate that polarization. All genuine reform must be grounded in reconversion to Christ, and Weigel's call to deeper holiness is passionate, and has nothing of the saccharine or the sentimental. He offers a heroic vision of the Christian life that is much needed in a time of despair and mediocrity. This heroic holiness, though, is also largely invulnerable. Although Weigel justly criticizes the abuses committed under the distorted influence of Henri Nouwen's "wounded healer" model of ministry—and offers qualified support for the model itself—he nonetheless leaves little room for the vulnerable leadership needed at this time.

Weigel constructs false dichotomies between the courageous, uncompromising leaders that are now needed and the bureaucratic, "episcopal discussion group moderator[s]" who have allegedly fed the crisis. He contrasts the "harder," "shatterproof" diamond of true Catholicism to the "flaccidity" and "softness" of his opponents. His ideal bishop does much teaching but seemingly less listening. His ideal priest is an icon of Christ who seems to hover above his community. He nods perfunctorily at collaboration and consultation, but makes clear that too much of both has contributed to the present mess of American Catholicism.

A fuller conception of holiness than Weigel's is needed—one that integrates heroism and vulnerability in Christian life and ministry. The English Dominican exegete Timothy Radcliffe has written that whereas Old Testament understandings of holiness stress ritual purity and separation, the Epistle to the Hebrews reveals Christ as the high priest and mediator who is holy precisely in embracing fully the brokennness and sinfulness of humanity. He reaches out to those marginalized, dispirited, angry, stigmatized. He reconciles through the blood of his cross and of the Eucharist. In this sense, the Catholic church needs leaders—clerical and lay—who have the courage to be not only countercultural but also woundable (the literal meaning of vulnerable).

Cardinal Law, for one, appeared—publicly, at least—to be aloof from the complaints and warnings of victim-survivors and their intimates, as well as from the concerns of laity and clergy in his archdiocese. Leadership, in a Christian sense, is decisive and authoritative only to the degree that it hears and bears the pain of the people and refuses to hide behind church and civil law. In a word, it must reflect the holiness of Christ.

Christian holiness bridges the distance that sin creates. It reconciles clergy and laity, liberals and conservatives, the innocent and the guilty. It would be foolish, even dangerous, to imagine that holiness alone will automatically resolve the sexual-abuse crisis or the polarization that divides much of American Catholicism; cultural, intellectual, and structural reforms are all essential and overdue. Without holiness, though, all of these needed reforms will collapse under the weight of history and resentment. With holiness, Faulkner's "past" might yet become a source of liberation, rather than the imprisonment it now often seems to be.