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Insider accounts from a lonely man

Rembert G. Weakland | May. 27, 2009

A Benedictine monk, a musician and a scholar, former Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland does more than merely trace his life in the church in his just released autobiography: **A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop** [1]*(Eerdmans, $35). He provides excellent -- if sometimes chilling insights -- into U.S. episcopal-Vatican relations, including his own frosty relationship with John Paul II and some Vatican officials. At home, many in the Milwaukee may find he too glibly glosses over his appropriating $450,000 in archdiocesan funds to pay off his sexual accuser, Paul Marcoux. In 2002, Weakland?s resignation as Milwaukee archbishop was accepted immediately following public disclosure -- on ABC?s ?Good Morning America? -- of that relationship.*

The reader gets to meet many people in Weakland?s life in the church, but not to know any of them. This lack of memorable sketches of others leaves the impression of a lonely man, somewhat elitist, who oscillates between kindly consideration and a fierce determination to defend his turf. The book?s lasting impact likely will be its insider accounts of the viciousness of church life, from the willingness with which the John Paul II pontificate accepted unsubstantiated and/or anonymous grievances against those disliked for doctrinal reasons, to the Stepford wives-like conformity at some levels of Vatican itself. An extended review of the book will appear in a forthcoming issue.

-- Arthur Jones, book editor

Excerpt: Archbishop Weakland: an insider account

The following excerpt is from the autobiography of Benedictine Rembert G. Weakland, former archbishop of Milwaukee. (A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church, *© 2009 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Reproduced by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved.) It is from the chapter ?Learning to be an Archbishop.?*

In June 1979, I was back in Rome to receive from Pope John Paul II a pallium, a woolen stole worn by residential archbishops (metropolitans). No matter where I went or to whom I was speaking -- cardinals or *minutanti* (the lowest officials) -- I heard the same story: Many negative rumors were circulating in the curia about what was happening in the archdiocese of Milwaukee. The pope was displeased with me.

To obtain some clarification I went to see Cardinal Sebastiano Baggio, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops. With remarkable bluntness he told me I had done two things that had raised eyebrows: I had held a dinner at the seminary for resigned priests and their wives and I had appointed a resigned priest to a chancery position. Several times, he repeated that there had been many objections from a number of cardinals in the United States and Rome to my being named Milwaukee?s archbishop. (He verified rumors that I had heard.)

He told me that these objections were based on an interview I had given the *National Catholic Reporter* some years before. I had said that I saw no convincing theological reasons against women?s ordination, but added that there were many sociological and psychological barriers to be overcome.

Baggio told me that he had consulted those who knew me well; all of them agreed that Weakland in his heart of hearts probably favors the ordination of women, but that he would not act outside the episcopal body or without Rome?s consent. This response satisfied any doubts or hesitation that Pope Paul VI may have been harboring.

Because of this background Baggio admonished me to ?keep my nose clean? (*non creare fastidi*). With similar frankness he told me how difficult it had become for him now to defend the decisions of local bishops, especially those in the United States. Complaints from disparate sources frequently arrived directly on the pope?s desk, especially through the Polish community resident in Rome. They were acted upon before his office had a chance to clarify matters with the bishop in question.

In my case, he told me that frequent complaints arrived from Msgr. Alphonse Popek, a Polish pastor in Milwaukee. These complaints were disseminated by Popek?s contact persons in Rome.

How seriously should I react to these rumors?

Wanting further advice, I consulted Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, who had been named secretary of state following the death of my friend Cardinal Jean-Marie Villot. I also wanted to talk with him about the U.S. church, how I found the situation on my return after an absence of 10 years.

He quickly dismissed the rumors concerning some of my administrative decisions, and asked to hear about the church in the United States. He listened carefully, interposing here and there pertinent questions, and saying several times how difficult it was for him to obtain a clear picture of what was happening in the States. He urged me to talk to Msgr. (now Cardinal) Justin Rigali (archbishop of Philadelphia), the person in charge of the English-speaking desk in the Secretariat of State, who, Casaroli pointed out, was the pope?s chief interpreter of the American church, and who should hear my point of view.

I agreed and he arranged for me to go directly down the hall to a small, dark waiting room where Rigali received me. He did most of the talking, confident he was well informed about the situation in the States and in Milwaukee in particular. His advice for me was unequivocal and could be summed up briefly as follows: I should seek to follow clearly in all matters the Holy Father?s mind as seen through the documents of the curia and conform myself to them for the sake of unity in the church?s teaching body, or magisterium; I should demonstrate absolute loyalty to the Holy See and inculcate such loyalty in my people; I should become a paragon of doctrinal orthodoxy in my teaching and writings, relying principally on the teachings of the pope and the curia. In this way my diocese and the church in the United States would be unified and strong.

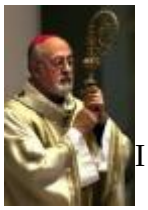
This refrain would be repeated to me by other curial officials many times in the years ahead. Whenever in subsequent visits I tried to bring up in conversation with members of the curia the question of collegiality between the pope and the bishops or among the bishops themselves, I was called ?ideological.?

After the *pallium* ceremony, and before leaving Rome, I had a private audience with Pope John Paul II. He received separately the nine archbishops to whom he had given *palliums*. I had arrived, naively as it turned out, with a list of issues I wanted to discuss. First on my list was to draw out his views on the concept of collegiality with the bishops and how it might function. I soon realized that the audience was a *visita di cortesia* (a courtesy call), and my attempts to bring up substantial issues were fruitless. He said I should return to these issues at a later date. He also waved off the ?Polish affair? I had stumbled into and did not want to discuss it.

Then, out of nowhere he asked me two questions. ?How long have you been a bishop?? and then just grunted when I responded, ?Less than two years.? ?And how long were you abbot primate of the Benedictines before that?? ?Ten years,? I responded. That provoked another grunt, but no comment.

At that meeting he never looked me in the eye and never betrayed his feelings, a behavior I had noticed in Poland. That trait and the ambiguous grunting I then assumed he had acquired as a survival technique under the communist regime. We had the usual photo opportunities and that ended the audience.

As I boarded the flight to Milwaukee and reflected on the trip, I realized that this visit had left me perplexed and a bit unnerved. I was not surprised to learn that my appointment to Milwaukee had not been well received by many in the curia. But I decided not to take their reactions too seriously, since I had a genuine distaste for the credence they gave to rumors and gossip. Of one thing I was sure: In the future, every opinion I uttered would be meticulously scrutinized by the curia, especially any statements on women?s ordination or the possibility of the ordination of married men.


I felt a bit disillusioned on my return home, but made up my mind that I would do my best for the faithful and the priests of Milwaukee and not let myself be put in a dehumanizing straitjacket.

I finally realized that the days of Pope Paul VI were over. I had moved from being an insider in his pontificate to an outsider in the new one. Though I had not fully analyzed the consequences, I could see that I would have to deal with this in the future. In my heart I knew that I would probably reject the advice of Rigali, and at my own peril; ultimately it became evident that he was outlining how the reign of Pope John Paul II would function. He was correct. ...

* * *

In December 1979, I found myself again on the way to Rome to confront Pope John Paul II. The difficulty centered on the appointment of Fr. Richard Sklba as my auxiliary bishop; he was the seminary rector. Archbishop Jean Jadot, the apostolic delegate, had made a thorough inquiry among priests and laity, both in the archdiocese and outside among seminary rectors, before placing Sklba?s name first in the terna he sent to Rome.

Rome had approved Sklba?s nomination, but, one week before his ordination as bishop and long after his appointment had been made public and the invitations to all the U.S. bishops sent out, the pope canceled the ordination.

Sklba had chaired a committee of American biblical scholars who issued a document stating that from a strictly biblical point of view, the ordination of women could not be decided one way or the other. But a codicil was added that upset the pope: The committee further stated that a positive answer would be more in keeping with the biblical evidence. Sources in Milwaukee had faxed this information to one of the pope?s secretaries who, in turn, had placed it on the pope?s desk. Pope John Paul II made the decision to cancel the ordination.

I flew with Sklba to Rome for a painful few days during which I vented my displeasure to Casaroli and Baggio. Both were helpful in acting as shuttles between the pope and us. Although I asked for a personal audience with the pope, Casaroli responded that he did not think it was wise for me to see the pope one-on-one, since, as he said, ?both of you are too angry to bring about any positive results.? He also relayed that the Holy Father had stated that he would permit a theologian to have a position in this matter different from his own, but not a bishop. Casaroli added, ?Even though we both know that this is not *de fide definita*,? a phrase that means ?defined as an article of faith.?

Several times Sklba was required to write up his position on the ordination of women, each draft of which was

taken to the pope by Casaroli. The pope kept rejecting these versions until late Saturday night when he finally gave in. Our plane left early Sunday morning, with the ordination scheduled for the following Wednesday. The process was impersonal, demeaning, unjust, and, most of all, lacking in any human sensitivity or concern for the life and reputation of Sklba. Moreover, the event confirmed a growing tendency in Rome to give credence to a powerful network of unofficial complaints that were influencing papal decisions.

I am forever grateful that Sklba became my auxiliary bishop. It is impossible for me to exaggerate the role he played in the archdiocese during the 23 years we worked together. Not only did he keep me from making many mistakes as an outsider, but with his thoughtful and positive approach to our ministry, he contributed to making my years as bishop a deeply rewarding experience. His knowledge of scripture and his personal sanctity were always evident. In this selection as auxiliary bishop, God was indeed good to me -- and to the people of Milwaukee.

The energy that went into clearing his name that week in Rome was more than worth the effort. It is true that he was not Polish but Slovak; that may have miffed some of the Polish pastors.

How long I reflected and prayed over the events of this brief but exceedingly disturbing visit to Rome! That trip galvanized me: I had to think out more precisely how I would offer my service as a bishop. I had dreamt of a functioning collegially among the bishops ?with and under the pope,? one that would not reduce individual bishops to mere spokespersons for the curia but see them as true collaborators. As a bishop, the least I had expected was that my opinions and ideas would be listened to as coming from an equal. Now, I had to take more time to think how the church after Vatican II should function. ...

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One of my priorities as a bishop was to participate fully in the work of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, headquartered in Washington. The full body of bishops, numbering around 280 at that time, met twice a year, each meeting lasting several days. To me this was an example of collegiality; thus participation for me was obligatory.

When I joined the conference in 1977, I was impressed by the competency of its staff; all were acknowledged experts in their fields. In my 25 years as bishop I missed only one conference meeting, that held in the spring of 1996 when I was on sabbatical.

Whenever I was asked to do anything in the conference, I willingly accepted. For example, in November 1978 the bishops elected me, still a newcomer, to chair for a three-year term the bishops? liturgy committee. It was a busy committee: translations had to be approved and the proper liturgical books printed. But it was material I knew. Moreover, its staff, Frs. Thomas Krosnicki [of the Society of the Divine Word], and John Guerrieri, excelled in every way.

The main concern I had to deal with in those three years was ?inclusive language? in translations, a new phenomenon that could have been marked ?tread lightly.? Specifically, the neuralgic point was the words of consecration in the institutional narrative of the Eucharist that contained the phrase ?for all men.? After extensive debate, the body of bishops voted to drop the word ?men? and Rome approved.

In the bishops? meeting of November 1980, because of many liturgical issues, I happened to be on the floor more than usual guiding the discussion. At that same meeting the bishops voted overwhelmingly for a statement condemning Marxism. After that vote Peter Rosazza, a young auxiliary bishop of Hartford, Conn., rose to make the suggestion that we write a letter on capitalism, since that is ?what the bishops of the world would expect of American bishops.? It was a fine idea and the vote to do so was positive.

At that same meeting the bishops voted to write a letter on peace and the nuclear threat. It too passed overwhelmingly. Rosazza?s proposal would drastically affect the next six years of my life. Little did I realize what I was getting into. (I give a full account of the economic pastoral, its process and outcome, in Chapter 12.) ...

* * *

Every five years I dutifully sent to Rome a lengthy report on the state of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee as requested by church law. Then, about six months later, I would make a trip there together with all the other bishops of the region. After the aborted visit of 1978, I made four such trips -- in 1983, 1988, 1993 and 1998. Each time, we bishops would meet as a group with various curial officials in selected congregations. The bishop or archbishop of each diocese would also be granted a private audience of 10 to 15 minutes with the pope -- a visit that became a mere formality since there was not sufficient time for any real dialogue.

Some of us suggested we forgo these short visits so that the whole group could have time for a lengthy serious dialogue with the pope on the urgent issues the Catholic Church in the United States faced, but that suggestion was not looked upon favorably.

On every *ad limina* trip without exception, I noticed that I would be singled out (the other bishops were never aware of this) and told to meet privately with Baggio in the Congregation for Bishops (or later with his successor Cardinal Bernardin Gantin in that same congregation) and then with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Upon arrival at their offices, I would be presented with a list of complaints. These were actions or decisions of mine that seemed to irritate the pope and members of the curia. I always felt a need to stand tall and not be intimidated, making it clear by my demeanor and responses that I was engaging in a conversation as bishop to bishop and not as a ?branch manager to the head office.?

Ratzinger, then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the former Holy Office or Office of the Inquisition), later Pope Benedict XVI, always treated me professionally and respectfully. The first time we met, in 1983, he had some of his staff present, but after that we always met alone. Although in private we sometimes spoke German together, when it came to these official meetings, he would slip into Italian where I was more comfortable and where he would not have a decided advantage. The complaints raised against me, it was evident, were provided by someone from Milwaukee who was monitoring my every word and action, mostly through the local diocesan and secular newspapers. Almost all the programs and lectures sponsored by the archdiocese, especially on sexuality, were being monitored. The cardinal never referred to scurrilous negative articles about me in ultraconservative Catholic papers published outside the archdiocese. Moreover, he made clear distinctions between matters that were of a dogmatic nature and those that were questions of pastoral judgment.

No real process was involved in these meetings; they just seemed like a friendly conversation, one that was not accusatory or threatening. Yet I knew better than to let the elegant atmosphere of that sitting room with its gilded baroque chairs covered in red damask seduce me into thinking these discussions were idle chatter.

In that first meeting in 1983 the cardinal brought up, as I had expected, complaints about the teaching of certain professors in the various colleges and universities in the archdiocese of Milwaukee. He was always concerned about the question of women?s ordination and mentioned that I should not raise false hopes that this might change even in a new pontificate. He was sensitive to the practice of inter-communion that, on some occasions, had been practiced by some priests of the archdiocese. As I expected from previous correspondence, he raised the question of the employment of resigned priests in the archdiocesan offices. I reiterated that I followed the policy set down by my predecessor, Archbishop [William] Cousins, namely, that, if the priest was officially laicized, I would not hesitate to hire him for a position that met the criteria set down in the document granting

the dispensation. Finally, he brought up the complaints about the sex education courses. Since I had sent him all that material and he had responded that his experts found no fault with the contents, he did not dwell on that issue.

On every topic, I would distinguish facts from whatever gossip his informants may have picked up, clarify the record where the information was false or faulty, and then defend my actions if I thought the issues at hand involved a prudential judgment that was the prerogative of the local bishop. Finally I would concede if there were something I had not taken care of that I should have. I can honestly say I never feared these meetings. If they were meant to intimidate me, I certainly did not let them do so. Ratzinger knew that no bishop could control all that happened in his diocese, having been himself the archbishop of Munich. When he would raise a point like girls serving at Mass, I could point out similar things happening in Rome, sometimes in the very shadow of St. Peter?s Basilica.

It is true that I never was informed who had sent in the complaints or saw them ahead of time, but the large number of Xerox copies of articles from Milwaukee newspapers that he had before him made it clear that they came from someone in the archdiocese itself. As an aside, I can say that in all honesty I felt Ratzinger?s heart was not in this kind of policing, if that is the right word for what was going on. I always assumed then and still do that he was carrying out papal orders.

After meeting in 1983 with Ratzinger I was asked to visit Baggio in the Congregation for Bishops where the same subjects were covered. During that visit in September of 1983, I heard many stories circulating in the curia about the dinner for resigned priests, most of them untrue. In all honesty I had to admit I was upset with the negative attitudes I found in Rome toward those who had left active ministry, almost as if they were to be ostracized or treated as lepers. Although I never held the view that the best had left -- as some were inclined to say -- I did regret the inestimable loss to the church of many very competent and faith-filled ministers.

For the private audience with the Holy Father, I had made a list of items I wanted to talk about. He seemed more relaxed in his manner of receiving bishops now, but commented very little on anything I said. The economic pastoral did not come up at all in the conversation. When I touched a delicate point like the role of women in the church or his resistance to permitting resigned priests to return to the lay state, he just cast his eyes down, crossed his arms, and grunted. At that time Pope John Paul II had taken a more restrictive stance toward priests asking to leave active ministry, probably thinking he could put a stop to the hemorrhaging by denying dispensations. It wasn?t working and only more deeply hurt those leaving.

At the end of that *ad limina* visit we bishops had the customary lunch with the pope. As we were finished eating, he asked if anyone wanted to bring up any specific issue not yet talked about. I swallowed a few times and then placed on the table the practice of not granting dispensations for resigned priests. I mentioned how, as a result, many excellent men and women were hurting. He went around the table asking the other bishops if they also knew of such men. Almost everyone replied in the affirmative. At the end, slouching in his chair, with elbows on the table and arms intertwined, he simply said: ?But I?m hurting too,? and ended the discussion.

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