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Biography of JPII raises questions about partiality

by Michael Baxter

The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II ? The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy

By George Weigel

Published by Doubleday, \$32.50

When George Weigel writes on John Paul II he is sure to raise concerns about partiality -- with good reason. In *Witness to Hope*, his 900-page account of the pope's life up to 1999, he does not hide his admiration of John Paul "the Great." Nor does he in this follow-up volume, which is likewise part biography, part history, part hagiography, all stamped with Weigel's American(ist) vision of the Church among the nations.

"The Beginning" refers to John Paul II's forty-year struggle against communism. Using documents that became available after *Witness to Hope* was published, Weigel shows that political leaders in Poland and the Soviet bloc regarded John Paul as a mortal threat to communism and tried everything?slander, blackmail, high-level espionage?to do him in. To no avail, "for the weapons Wojtija deployed were weapons whose impact communist tactics could not blunt."

Weigel's story is that of a politically repressive regime upheld by a false philosophy being gradually defeated by a man of peace, patience, and trust in providence, culminating with "the revolution of conscience" the Pope ignited in June 1979, and the ensuing disintegration of the Soviet bloc. The account is marred by a closing "reflection" suggesting the pope and President Reagan played complementary roles in toppling communism. Pope and president working hand in hand to bring justice, peace, and human freedom to the world? A close reading of *Evangelium Vitae*, paras. 68-74, shows that His Holiness wasn't so sanguine about U.S. democracy.

"The End" covers the last six years of John Paul's papacy, from the Great Jubilee of 2000 to his illness, death, funeral, and the reaction around the world. It reads quickly and usefully sums up his activities?synods, canonizations, encyclicals, pastoral visits?during those years.

In the third part to the book, "Metanoia," Weigel gives his account of John Paul II's life and "the measure" of his pontificate. Weigel puts a positive spin on most everything JP II said and did. Among other things, the book will continue to draw rebukes for not criticizing the pope's abiding admiration of the fornicating, ephebophilic founder and head of the Legionaries of Christ. Still, Weigel's assessment is important for understanding John Paul II, and for understanding Catholics who find him all together inspiring.

The most intriguing and least convincing aspect of Weigel's portrayal of John Paul II has to do with a matter on which the two clearly disagreed: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. He offers a string of explanations as to why the pontiff's "convictions, commitments, and perceptions" were distorted. The pope hoped there were better ways to settle things than resorting to arms. He was disposed to support the United Nations. He was concerned for the welfare of Christian communities in the Middle East. He did not want to give credence to the claim that the war between Islamist terrorism and the West was a religious war. And he believed that responsibility for going to war falls upon statesmen exercising prudential judgment, as stated in the Catechism (paragraph 2309). To this last explanation Weigel adds the claim that the Pope refrained from declaring the war unjust because it "would place a heavy burden of conscience on Catholic members of the armed forces involved in that action, with potentially grave personal, political, and military consequences." Really? I'd like to see the documentary evidence supporting that claim.

Reading Weigel's account, one begins to wonder whether or not the pope had a substantial view about the U.S. invasion of Iraq. And, as it turns out, he didn't. Rather, according to Weigel, the official opposition to the invasion came not from the Pope, but from other offices of the Holy See, which suffered from "an uncoordinated (and sometimes unintelligible) diplomatic and communications strategy." Here Weigel names names. Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, secretary for relations with states, called the invasion "a war of aggression and therefore a crime against humanity." Archbishop Renato Martino, the Holy See's "volatile and voluble" representative to the U.N., went so far as to describe Colin Powell's presentation of the U.S. case against Iraq as "vague and unconvincing." As for the Holy See's irresponsibility in journalism, Weigel recalls that L'Osservatore Romano "ran bloodcurdling banner headlines such as 'The Madness of War.'" The Jesuit-run *La Civiltà Cattolica* "published a brutally anti-American editorial," charging the Bush administration with undermining international law and stirring up jihadist sentiment, "all in pursuit of imperial 'dominion.'" Bloodcurdling headlines? Brutal editorials? There they go again, those crazed fanatics at the Holy See.

Weigel has been cleverly pitting John Paul II against clueless church bureaucrats for quite some time; first, in trying to dismiss *The Challenge of Peace* (1983); then after the Gulf War in 1991; and again before, during, and after the Iraq invasion. He even suggested that parts of *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) were foisted on Benedict XVI by his obstinate underlings?the parts, of course, most critical of capitalism. This interpretive tactic is difficult to rebut because Weigel knows so much Vaticanalia and is ever ready to claim some secret gnosis gathered from his last trip there; "I had dinner at the CDF last Thursday and learned over our aperitif. . ."

So when it comes to the Iraq war, it is more illuminating to note his connections not in Rome but inside the Beltway.

Take, for example, Weigel's founding membership in a D.C. think tank modestly calling itself "The Project for the New American Century." Its purpose: to promote the leadership role of the United States in

the post-Cold-War era, and to make clear that this will require a strong military presence throughout the world. Other founding members included Elliot Abrams (convicted), Jeb Bush, Dick Cheney, Irving Kristol, Lewis Libby (convicted), Norman Podhoretz, Dan Quayle, and Paul Wolfowitz. That was in 1997. Five years later, this cohort was in a position to make good on their plans. Weigel did his part, supplying rhetorical cover for the U.S. invasion of Iraq with the clichéd "prudential judgment" argument, allowing pro-war Catholics to dismiss His Holiness's misgivings.

In the acknowledgments for *The End and the Beginning*, Weigel reveals that at no time during their many visits and conversations "did John Paul II try to bend my analysis or judgment in a certain direction." If this is true concerning the war in Iraq, it was a rare and unfortunate instance of John Paul "the Great" shirking a pastoral task.

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