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Weakland's memoir: fighting for an auxiliary

Tom Roberts | Jul. 31, 2009

I recently finished reading Archbishop Rembert Weakland?s A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop, and found it most intriguing for the eyewitness account he can provide of how deep the opposition to Vatican II was in the curia from the very start. He also provides the kind of look behind the curtain at the U.S. bishops and their meetings that only an insider can provide.

I covered the annual national meetings of the conference for about 10 years beginning in 1985 and witnessed that body move from one that considered giant questions ? nuclear weapons and the economy, among the biggest ? to a rather insular group that would spend hours explaining why the prayers we pray have to avoid feminine pronouns. I recall one Midwest auxiliary rising at the start of an afternoon session during one of the bishops? spring meetings ? following a morning of tedium during which some of the bishops went on and on about those pronouns and about the need to protect the identity of Catholic universities ? and asking his brother bishops if they thought the group would ever again get around to discussing issues that might be of interest to someone outside the room. I don?t recall that he received an answer.

But most of what we reporters got were intimations of things changing. It was the kind of thing one picked up over the occasional meal with a bishop or two or perhaps during a long lunch in Rome. But it was never for the record. It was only enough, usually, to let you know that you were on the right track. No quotes, no names.

Weakland brings out the quotes and the names and frustrations with the conference as it changed with years of appointments under John Paul II, who was intent on trimming the power and authority of national conferences.

He also provides first-hand accounts of encounters with Vatican officials and with popes. The impression is that life inside the Vatican, with all the good that can occur, can be especially cutthroat and petty.

In one scene he relates having to defend the appointment of then Fr. Richard Sklba as his auxiliary bishop. ?One week before his ordination as bishop and long after his appointment had been made public and invitations to all the U.S. bishops sent out, the pope (John Paul II) cancelled the ordination.?

It turns out that Sklba had led a committee of American biblical scholars that had concluded that ?from a strictly biblical point of view, the ordination of women could not be decided one way or the other.? The paper contained an addendum that apparently ?upset the pope.? It stated that ?a positive answer would be more in keeping with the biblical evidence.? The ever-present right wing orthodoxy police in Milwaukee sent the information to one of the pope?s secretaries and the pope, on that basis, decided to cancel the ordination.

Weakland and Sklba immediately flew to Rome where high-ranking cardinals acted as go-betweens with the pope, who refused to meet Weakland personally. He demanded that Sklba write up a position on ordination of women that would be acceptable. ?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,? wrote Weakland.

?The process was impersonal, demeaning, unjust, and, most of all, lacking in any human sensitivity or concern for the life and reputation of Father 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'll have more on the book in future postings.

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