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Popes and the devil of inner absolutism

Arthur Jones | Jul. 27, 2011

ABSOLUTE MONARCHS: A HISTORY OF THE PAPACY
By John Julius Norwich
Published by Random House, $30

O what a gift John Julius Norwich ?would gie us,? had he written a 500-page history of the popes over the past 150 years, rather than about most of them over the past 2,000 years.

Norwich is fun: He has Pio Nono (Pius IX, 1846-78) arrive as a liberal and depart infallible. Leo XIII (1878-1903) is ?respected and revered, but not loved. No temporal monarch ever surrounded himself with more ceremonial.? Benedict XV?s (1914-22) pontificate ?was doomed before it started ... he remained relatively obscure? seen as neither ?handsome nor remotely charismatic.? Pius XI (1922-39) was ?an autocrat through and through, bigoted, reactionary, and inflexible.? Pius XII (1939-58) was an ?icy autocrat.?

As it is, in his fine but unkind *Absolute Monarchs*, Norwich confronts the same challenge all histories of the papacy face: taking aim. Too much detail (?the passionately Monophysite Empress Theodora?) and the average erudite reader reaches for the latest Donna Leon novel. Too little, and the historians, historians manqué and seminarians have no footnotes to fuss over. There are none here.

However, Norwich tends toward detail. In his informative and frequently entertaining history, he offsets the tedium threat of one pope after another with light anecdotes, witty asides or a quote from the master, Edmund Gibbon.

Now it?s not quite correct to call modern popes ?absolute monarchs.? They haven?t been monarchs in the old fashioned sense since Paul VI gave up the crown not long after his coronation in 1963. Popes since have been installed. They may no longer be twinned with the other surviving absolute monarchy, Saudi Arabia, but the popes are one with the former absolute monarchs, now autocrats acting like monarchs, such as the sultans of Oman and Bahrain, and the emirates.

Not everyone is comfortable under this absolute monarchic rule. Even Pope Benedict XVI, in an earlier incarnation as liberal theologian Joseph Ratzinger, was disturbed (in *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*) by the monarchical aspects of the papacy. He wrote of the ?isolation of the monarchical episcopate.? He believed the synodal system must always be present to ?correct the monarchic idea.? For the past two decades, and more, the synodal system has been a creature of the monarchy, not a counterbalance to it.

As a pope wearing the Wojtyla mantle, Ratzinger finds he enjoys the monarchic role and has given no indication he intends to alter the monarchic imbalance by restoring independent synods.

Popes are prisoners of 1,700 years of history. They are victims of the organizational culture (except, of course, for those who revel in the power of it all). What the culture has done in the past 30 years is deteriorate into a cult: the cult of the papacy. The only thing strong enough to change the culture is a more powerful culture: democratic forms, women priests, accountability and transparency would do it, of course.

For the occasional pope the devil of inner absolutism rooted in the arrogance of office may propel him along a path he does not in his heart wish to travel -- but must in his mind and habits, so formed is he by the institution that has placed him where he is. Measured against this, John XXIII was less a reformer than a cultural revolutionary.

Buy Norwich?s book. Begin at Page 394. Then go back to the beginning to see how we got into this mess. However, it seems as if, in the final paragraphs, Norwich feels he may have been a little tough on some recent officeholders, and too forthright on the papacy?s treatment of women. Consequently, Norwich concludes his survey with, ?If he could see it now, St. Peter would -- I think -- be proud indeed.?

I think St. Peter would be appalled.

[Arthur Jones is *NCR* books editor.]

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