NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'Poped out' Wills seeks broader horizons

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 21, 2008

Garry Wills at home (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

Commonweal editor Paul Baumann mockingly calls the "Catholic commentariat," meaning the galaxy of prominent Catholics eager to serve up their insights about the state of the church.

Last April, however, when Pope Benedict XVI came to town, one of the brightest stars in that firmament was conspicuously absent. Historian and journalist Garry Wills, perhaps the most distinguished Catholic intellectual in America over the last 50 years, spurned requests for comment from every major TV network, as well as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

It may seem a curious missed opportunity for the author of 2000's *Papal Sin*, a blistering, best-selling polemic against what he described as systemic papal dishonesty and inflated papal power. Wills, however, offers a simple motive for his reticence: "I'm poped out."

"I've had my say, and I have no desire to say more," he said. "Popes don't interest me very much."

Therein lies a key to understanding the unique spot on the Catholic landscape occupied by Wills, one of the most fascinating personalities American Catholicism has ever produced. In the wake of *Papal Sin*, fans and critics alike tended to style Wills as a new guru of the Catholic left, a sort of Noam Chomsky for the Call to Action set. In truth, he is both less and more. Less, in that Wills has no interest in leading a reform campaign in Catholicism, since doing so would imply investment in an institution he regards as irrelevant and dull; more, in that Wills is hardly just a "Catholic writer," but one of America's most distinguished nonfiction writers, period, whose horizons are far broader than the church.

Wills' remarkable life and career thus reflect several realities of U.S. Catholic life: the emancipation of American Catholics from their pre-Vatican II ghetto into the full light of secular accomplishment and acclaim; the post-Vatican II option of many liberal Catholics for political and social crusades rather than internal church concerns; and the consequent quandary of the Catholic left, which is that its best and brightest often don't care

enough about the institutional church to stand and fight.

Now 73 and still going strong, Wills sat down with *NCR* for an extended interview at his home in Evanston, Ill., near the campus of Northwestern University, where he has served as a professor of history since 1980.

Success in two worlds

Wills is an academic and a journalist, putting him on both sides of what has long been a peculiar love/hate relationship. Reporters mock the specialized jargon and narrow interests of the egghead class, but depend upon the fruits of their learning; intellectuals lament the superficiality of journalists, but envy their fame and public influence.

What's distinctive about Wills is not that he has a foot in both worlds, but that he has scaled heights of success in both that few ever attain in one.

There's never been any doubt about his erudition. Wills is the kind of guy who, as a young man, when asked if he was a conservative, would reply, "No, I'm a distributist." (To save traffic on the Wikipedia Web site, distributism is a political theory associated with the English Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton and 19th-century papal social teaching. It posits that ownership of the means of production should be widely distributed among the population, rather than controlled by the state, as in communism, or by financial elites, as in capitalism. Its model is the medieval guild system. Not coincidentally, Wills' first book was on Chesterton, and he remains for Wills an enormous influence.)

Today Wills is regarded as America's premier presidential historian, with acclaimed studies of Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Kennedy and Nixon. His Pulitzer Prize came for the 1992 book *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America*, which is routinely assigned at major American universities as mandatory reading for incoming freshmen.

Wills is also an accomplished expert on antiquity. His doctorate from Yale was in the classics, and in 1999 he published a powerful biography of St. Augustine. This fall, he's bringing out a new translation of the Latin epigrams of Martial -- typically, it's a project he pursued largely as a way to unwind. He's also set to publish a small book, based on a lecture at the Smithsonian, entirely devoted to one fairly obscure 19th-century American painting: Thomas Eakins' "William Rush Carving the Allegory of the Schuylkill River."

Yet this consummate intellectual is also one of the country's most acclaimed reporters, with a keen eye for detail and a knack for being where the action is.

Wills' 1969 tour de force *Nixon Agonistes*, for example, managed to blend deep questions of political theory with on-the-spot color from Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign, much of which rivals the best of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson's later account of Nixon's '72 re-election bid, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, for both insight and comic relief. For a taste, here's Wills on Nelson Rockefeller: "First-generation millionaires tend to give us libraries. The second and third generations think they should give us themselves. Naturally, some people want to look this gift horse in the mouth -- which may be the reason Rockefeller keeps his teeth on display."

Wills famously began his journalistic career as a right-wing protégé of fellow Yalie William F. Buckley Jr. at the *National Review*. During a subsequent stint as a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter* in the paper's early years, he was considered the "token conservative" on the opinion page. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, however, Wills moved steadily to the left, driven by the experience of covering the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War protests.

No matter where Wills stood on the ideological spectrum, his writing in venues such as *Esquire*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *New York* magazine always turned heads. Over time, he entered that select circle of journalists who are almost as much a celebrity as the people they cover.

Wills befriended opera diva Beverly Sills, for example, and became especially close to her mother. He also became close to cult filmmaker John Waters, who rescued Wills from arrest during the 1972 counter-inaugural protest in Washington by claiming him as a member of his film crew. He struck up a friendship with Bill Willis, the drummer at Jack Ruby's Dallas nightclub. (Wills published a biography of Ruby in 1968, eschewing conspiracy theories about Ruby's involvement in a Kennedy assassination plot because, as Wills put it, "he was incapable of organizing anything." He quotes Willis about Ruby's motive for killing Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald: "I'm downtown anyway ... might as well shoot him.")

It's part of Wills' charm that he manages to relay such experiences without a trace of vanity.

Such is the stratosphere of secular regard in which Wills moves that when the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke,

he published an opinion piece for *TIME* magazine calling upon President Bill Clinton to resign, and yet Clinton still felt compelled to give Wills the National Medal for the Humanities. In a White House ceremony just after the piece appeared, Clinton read a citation praising Wills' "amazing set of insights over a broad range of subjects" -- adding the impromptu qualification, "Sometimes I have a little problem with that one."

In Catholic terms, Wills is a classic case of a local boy who made good. He emerged from the cocoon of preconciliar ghetto Catholicism in the United States, and took the secular world by storm.

He was born in Atlanta in 1934, but spent most of his youth in Adrian, Mich., where he attended schools run by the famed Adrian Dominican sisters. He recalls inscribing "JMJ" on his schoolwork, saying "Hail Marys" before free throws, and cultivating devotion to the Infant of Prague. Looking back from the perspective of the early 1970s, Wills would write: "It was a ghetto, but not a bad ghetto to grow up in."

The experience obviously left its mark. To this day, Wills says he has never seriously questioned his Catholic faith. He is a weekly Mass-goer at the Sheil Catholic Center at Northwestern University, and prays the rosary every day. ("I haven't got that many ways to pray that I can afford to lose the one that comes most easily," he said with a laugh.) Although he parts company with church teaching on papal infallibility, abortion and transubstantiation, he's perfectly comfortable with the Nicene Creed: "I stick with the basics," Wills said.

Martin Marty, the famed Lutheran scholar of religion, calls Wills "incurably Catholic"; in a similar vein, the Catholic novelist and sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley, another Chicagoan, told *NCR* that "anyone who carries the rosary every day and says it has to be a good Catholic." (In a typical Greeley twist, he later asked to amend that to "has to be possessed by the analogical imagination," and perhaps including both versions here does justice to the dual sides of Wills' personality -- the popular journalist and the obscure academic.)

Given his intellectual precociousness, the teenage Wills inevitably gravitated into the orbit of the Jesuits. He attended Campion Prep School in Prairie du Chien, Wis., falling under the spell of forward-thinking young scholastics. He entered the seminary, but became disenchanted with what he regarded as its intellectual aridity.

He completed his graduate work at Yale, where Buckley recruited him for the *National Review*. One of Wills' first assignments was to help Buckley defend himself against Catholic liberals who had charged him with disrespect for papal social teaching, especially John XXIII's 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, which Buckley saw as a soft on socialism. Wills' contribution was to coin the famous quip #147;*Mater Si, Magistra No*!" In many ways, the line could serve as a motto for Wills' brand of Catholicism -- deep love for the faith and tradition, coupled with skepticism about ecclesiastical authority and its claims to special wisdom.

Eventually, Wills drifted away from Buckley's hard-right stances. The definitive break came when Wills penned an essay for *National Review* critical of the Vietnam War, which Buckley spiked. The two later reconciled, but Wills never returned to the ideological fold.

Beyond ecclesiastical questions

Despite -- or, perhaps, as a means of escaping -- his all-encompassing Catholic formation, Wills' interests and life experiences have led him well beyond narrowly ecclesiastical questions.

Ask Wills to name the most impressive people he's ever met, and there's not a prominent

Catholic in the bunch. He ticks off Jesse Jackson, Sills, the early Jimmy Carter, Hillary Clinton up to her vote in favor of the Iraq war, and the recently deceased Studs Terkel. To be fair, Wills also mentions Buckley, but not because of his *über*-Catholicism -- he instead cites Buckley's "generosity and egalitarianism, despite his hierarchical theories."

Terkel was a particular Wills favorite. He recounts once watching Terkel introduce himself to Federal Appeals Court Judge Richard Posner, a distinguished conservative jurist who also teaches law at the University of Chicago, during an academic function. Terkel informed Posner that he got his law degree from the University of Chicago, and asked the judge what subject he teaches.

"Studs is very hard of hearing, and basically hears what he expects to hear," Wills said with a laugh. "So when Posner told him his subject was 'Evidence,' Studs looked at him and said, 'What's that? Avarice?' "

Though he's a talented raconteur, Wills has no such colorful anecdotes about Catholic churchmen. He says that he attended the Dallas meeting of the U.S. bishops in 2002 at the peak of the sexual abuse crisis, and found them "not an impressive group."

As another index of Wills' disinterest in matters ecclesiastical, consider that this is a writer who's traveled far and wide to meet virtually every political and intellectual figure of consequence over four decades, yet who's never even gone downtown in Chicago once to meet his local cardinal. (Today, Wills said he actually avoids settings in which Cardinal Francis George may be present, preferring to huddle with U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, a pro-choice Catholic, to compare notes on critical things George has said about both of them.)

Wills concedes that his own children don't practice the faith. He and his wife, Natalie, have a daughter who's a literary agent in New York (her authors include John Dean and the children's writer Francesca Lia Block), as well as two sons, one a textbook writer and the other an aspiring environmental lawyer. Wills says their indifference to the institutional church doesn't cause him any regret.

"It's their choice. Anyway, they're basically good, moral people, which is all that matters," he said.

A masterpiece of Catholic prose

Prior to *Papal Sin*, Wills' lone serious foray into writing about the contemporary church came with 1972's *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion*, widely considered a masterpiece of recent Catholic prose. Perhaps no work better captured the period immediately after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), when wild optimism about the church's future oscillated with deep despair, and almost everything seemed in flux.

The book was vintage Wills, blending deep analysis with vivid storytelling. To illustrate the church's post-Vatican II identity crisis, for example, Wills described a debate that erupted at a Jesuit residence in New York when a former member of the order, who had become a peace activist and a member of the "D.C. Nine," moved in with his wife and baby.

The arrangement irked some Jesuits, though as Wills explained, their opposition was "ill-focused" -- because, to be frank, "undisturbed leisure and easy access to the TV are not very high grounds on which to vindicate the sacredness of the cloister."

Reading *Bare Ruined Choirs* today, it can be difficult to understand how anyone felt blindsided by *Papal Sin*, because it was all there: Wills derided the natural law reasoning behind the church's ban on birth control, expressed contempt for the "imbalance and ignorance displayed at the very top rungs of the hierarchy," and insisted that arguments for priestly celibacy are "nothing but dodges and deceits." He was contemptuous of "the

obsessive old men who have risked all credibility, order and good will within the church to uphold their animus against human intercourse."

Perhaps conservatives simply didn't absorb those portions of *Bare Ruined Choirs* because they were too enchanted by the book's skewering of the pre-Vatican II Catholic left, especially its craven longing for acceptance by the liberal American establishment. Wills described how an exaggerated separation of church and state, given theoretical form by Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray and symbolized by the 1960 election of John Kennedy, in practice meant submission to the secular status quo: "By the early '60s," he wrote, "there was nothing less dangerous than a Catholic priest."

What traditionalists failed to notice, however, was that the Catholic values Wills longed to see brought into American politics were not those of today's "faith and values" contingent, but rather those of the radical left, especially the antiwar Berrigan brothers. The book's last line said it all: "It is time to join the underground."

Bare Ruined Choirs certainly proved that Wills could apply his journalistic chops to the Catholic church as well as he could to any other topic. Yet it didn't transform him into a religious affairs writer, and over the next quarter-century his greatest accomplishments would come in other arenas.

In a sense, therefore, when he turned to *Papal Sin*, it was not a book he particularly wanted to write. Instead, he said, it came out of a feeling of obligation.

"I had known very intelligent, conscientious priests who had a big influence on me, and I felt that their views were not being reflected in the general discussion of the church," Wills said.

"That was true of a lot of people I knew. I have friends who are ex-seminarians, as I am, and a number of them have drifted away from the church. The Sheil Center, where I go to Mass, is full of people who are totally disaffected from the hierarchy, but who still believe and still go to church."

A 'suburban Poverello'

One measure of a book's impact is the level of vituperation it arouses, and by that standard, few Catholic titles in recent memory have proved quite as provocative as *Papal Sin*. Writing in *First Things*, Jesuit critic Edwin Oakes termed Wills a tiresome "suburban Poverello," in need of a course in elementary logic. Not to be outdone, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus accused Wills of being a "cultural Erastian," meaning, roughly, that whenever there's a tension between liberal democracy and Roman Catholicism, in Wills' mind it's always liberal democracy that should prevail.

(On this score, Wills is happy to concede: "I like liberal democracy, there's no doubt about that," he said, arguing that so does Catholic tradition. In the councils of the early church, Wills insists, matters were settled on a "one man, one vote" basis.)

Some eight years after *Papal Sin* first appeared, conservatives still seem to be smarting, though they usually strike a note of regret rather than rage.

"He seems to live in a world that's 'forever 1968,' and that means he's missed a lot of what's been evangelically exciting and fresh about the last 40 years, including the greatness of John Paul II," George Weigel told *NCR*. "That's a sadness, both for the U.S. Catholic debate and for American culture."

In the wake of the book, Wills said he found that Catholic colleges are no longer as eager to offer him honorary degrees as they once were. Beyond that, Wills said, officialdom has precious little other leverage to employ, since he is neither a priest nor an employee of a Catholic institution.

If he had it to do over again, Wills said he might be more sensitive to *Papal Sin*'s argumentative tone. In the main, however, he's been gratified by how Catholics responded.

"It comforted a lot of people who think the same things I think, and who worried that maybe they're not a good Catholic after all," Wills said. "I gave them encouragement, which is the nicest thing that came out of those two books," referring to *Papal Sin* and his 2002 follow-up, *Why I Am a Catholic*.

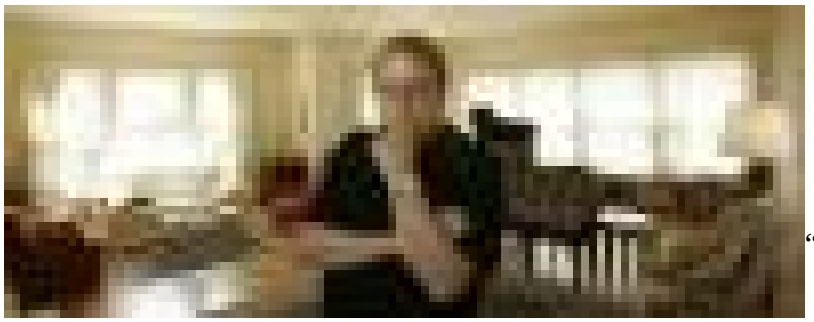
Critics who gave Wills their best shot may be disheartened to learn that, in his view, the slings and arrows generated by *Papal Sin* were "nothing" compared to the furor unleashed by some of his political writing. For example, Wills said an angry reader once returned a piece he had written about Nixon with excrement smeared all over it, and another mailed him a picture that appeared with his newspaper column with Wills' eyes jabbed out.

Even Catholic voices who tried to drum him out of the church, he said, were less hysterical than hyper-patriots who questioned his credentials as an American after Wills wrote that President George W. Bush is not his commander in chief. (Wills points out that under Article II, Section II, of the Constitution, the president is commander in chief only of the Army and Navy, as well as "the militia of the several states, when called into the actual service of the United States.")

'Wills Catholics'

When *Papal Sin* appeared, many Catholic liberals thought they had found their Moses, a long-sought progressive alternative to a perceived conservative monopoly on Catholic "spin." In a February 2003 piece in *Commentary*, British journalist Daniel Johnson even supplied the appropriate taxonomy, suggesting that American Catholicism can be divided into "Weigel Catholics" and "Wills Catholics."

What those reactions failed to appreciate, however, is that Wills never saw himself that way.



"I never meant to try to bring about change [in the church], because that's not my business," Wills said. "I'm Catholic, always have been, but I'm not running for any particular Catholic status. I just practice my faith."

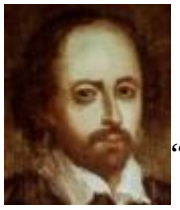
If pressed, Wills expresses basic confidence that the church will eventually move in the direction he's outlined: "After all, more people agree with my position than with the pope's on a lot of these things," he said. He scoffs at suggestions that Pope John Paul II revitalized institutional Catholicism: "If he were all that popular, wouldn't more young men want to be like him? Wouldn't there be no priest shortage?"

Yet Wills has no ambition to be the one who moves things along. Wills is emphatic that he has no inclination -- "none, zero" -- to serve as a spokesperson for dissidents in the church. Aside, perhaps, from a study of the Book of Revelation to complement his titles on the Gospels and on St. Paul, Wills said he has no intention of writing anything more on Catholic topics. Even the prospect of a study of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, holds no appeal.

When asked if he would be tempted to accept should Pope Benedict XVI himself offer to sit down for an exclusive, no-holds-barred interview, Wills doesn't hesitate to say no. Yet if opera singer Natalie Dessay were to dangle the same invitation, Wills said, "I'd do it in a shot."

So it goes with Wills, whose mastery of the Catholic past at times seems rivaled only by his disinterest in its present.

In terms of his future plans, Wills said he hopes to find time for several projects that have been brewing for a while, including an analysis of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Coriolanus." He's also still deeply fascinated by politics (the bookish Wills takes a break from literary pursuits each evening to sit down with his wife to watch "The Daily Show"), and was passionate in midsummer about what he believed was at stake in the 2008 election.

 "The Constitution's at stake," he said then. "The main problem with this country is the usurpation of power by the executive branch ... the total secrecy in which it's operated. We've become world famous for torture. One year when there were a lot of lynchings down South, Mark Twain said we are now 'the United States of Lyncherdom.' Well, today we're 'the United States of Torturedom.' To have this kind of denial of constitutional rights, and total defiance of Congress, is tragic, and it's got to end."

For the record, Wills was an unabashed supporter of President-elect Barack Obama. He quotes his editor at *The New York Review of Books*, Robert Silvers, to the effect that Obama could be the best writer-president since Lincoln. Given Wills' own expertise on Lincoln, that's high praise indeed.

Given Wills' drive and basic good health, he could have two decades or more of productive writing ahead. He was inspired by Terkel's zest and curiosity.

Yet the curiosity that drives Wills these days, as "catholic" as it is in other ways, simply doesn't include the vicissitudes of the institutional church. As a result, apologists for papal authority may face plenty of other challenges in the years to come, but -- to paraphrase the subject of Wills' classic, *Nixon Agonistes* -- they apparently won't have Garry Wills to kick around anymore.

John L. Allen Jr. is NCR *senior correspondent. His e-mail address is* jallen@ncronline.org.

National Catholic Reporter November 28, 2008

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/07/2015 - 17:30*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/poped-out-wills-seeks-broader-horizons

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end