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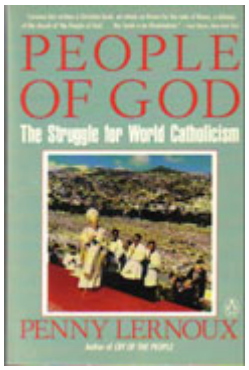
A document of Vatican II's undoing

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 11, 2012

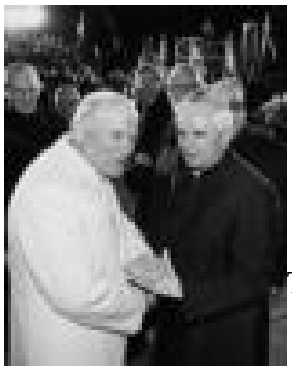


PEOPLE OF GOD: THE STRUGGLE FOR WORLD CATHOLICISM
By Penny Lernoux
Published by Viking, 1989

Penny Lernoux saw it all coming. Writing a quarter-century ago, in the midst of a counter-reformation to the Second Vatican Council that is still unfolding, the author laid it out in *People of God*.

By 1989 -- a decade into what would be the historically long reign of Pope John Paul II -- Lernoux, *NCR*?s Latin American affairs correspondent, had tracked the retrenchment back to even before the closing of the council in 1965. In *People of God*, she illustrates how, where and by whom the council?s message had been, and was still being, filtered, distilled, or even just sliced and diced into something nearly beyond recognition.

Gathering an army of facts any journalist would envy, Lernoux arranges them so we can understand the importance of each of the little moves of the undoing -- beginning with the initial ignorance most Catholics had toward John Paul?s clear opposition to what the council fathers had endorsed, a less hierarchical church with ever-increasing lay involvement.



The papal moves included the neutering of national bishops? councils, the refusal to laicize priests, the disciplining of theologians, a strong stance against women?s equality and ordination, and an embrace of earlier liturgical forms.

Considering her viewpoint, Lernoux?s emphasis on the Latin American church -- particularly the attempted

silencing of liberation theologians -- is understandable. But it?s her relatively brief focus on the Dutch church that?s remarkable in its impact.

Lernoux reminds us that, following the council, the Netherlands was nearly alone among the European churches in trying to break down the barriers between laity and clergy. Perhaps it?s her description of a people ?deeply humiliated? following the reining in of their bishops -- which foreshadowed a turning loose in the United States of those with quite the opposite vision -- that best puts in words how some of us feel today about our own episcopal leadership.

Yet, at the same time, I couldn?t help but read the book with an odd sense of detachment. As Lernoux cites the powerful, sometimes bruising role of Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, in the tightening of the doctrinal ship, I couldn?t help but wonder: ?It can?t be that bad, can it?? It seems images of the stern interrogator who would call to Rome those who strayed too far have been replaced with those of an old, tired man who enjoys long walks.

But perhaps therein lies the point. For many, the key image of the church is still that of one man, making most of the decisions. That reality places on its head the key notion of the book and the council: No person alone represents us. Or, as Lernoux puts it, it?s the ?many different peoples with complementary responsibilities and charisms? who truly describe the church.

That alone is a reminder for which another read is well worth it.

The works of Penny Lernoux

- Re-encountering Lernoux [1], *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters (Centennial Edition)* reviewed by Chris Herlinger
- A web of greed and power grabs [2], *In Banks We Trust: Bankers and Their Close Associates: the CIA, the Mafia, Drug Traders, Dictators, Politicians and the Vatican* reviewed by Brian Roewe
- 32 years later, book on Latin America still challenges us [3], *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America* reviewed by Zoe Ryan
- A document of Vatican II's undoing [4], *People of God: The Struggle For World Catholicism* reviewed by Joshua J. McElwee

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