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

Garry Wills Please Go Away

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 14, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Garry Wills, in an essay at The New York Times [1], gives away his argument in the very first paragraph. He writes:

In monarchies, change is supposed to come from the top, if it is to come at all. So people who want to alter things in Catholic life are told to wait for a new pope. Only he has the authority to make the changeless church change, but it is his authority that stands in the way of change.

The key phrase here is "people who want to alter things in Catholic life." Does he not see that someone whose ambition is to alter things in Catholic life had better be balanced by someone who worries that some alterations, driven by human ambition or human prejudice or even more noble if misguided desires, might lead astray? Can Wills, who is certainly a leading cultural critic of our time, not find within the past few generations times when the "will of the people" or "the progressive movement" or some such led the country or their church astray? Where is the role for self-surrender, a key part of any Christian project, in this desire to alter? The "will of the people" was all for the war in Iraq, was it not? Did not Nixon win twice? Did not the progressive movement promise that no fault divorce laws liberate women when, in fact, the people who were most damaged by no-fault divorce laws were women, especially poor women? As for the life of the Christian faith, Luther wanted to alter the Church and he ended up dividing it. Calvin wanted to purify the Church and he bequeathed to the Western world a view of grace as a stingy thing, dispenses only to the predestined. Does Wills think those alterations were good?

I think the editors at the Times captured Wills' argument in the title they assigned to his article: "New Pope? I've Given Up Hope." I commend Mr. Wills to the First Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is within you." I cannot see into this man's soul, but any soul who has given up hope must ask if he has not also lost his faith. And, if his faith is lost, he is not part of the sensus fidelium. I hope Mr. Wills rediscovers his faith and his hope but until he does, he should stop posing as a Christian commentator.

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2014 - 00:32*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/garry-wills-please-go-away

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/13/opinion/new-pope-ive-given-up-hope.html?_r=1&