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Evangelical Catholicism: A Review

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

George Weigel?s newest book, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church,* is not without certain moments of lucidity, but fundamentally the text fails to deliver on what the title promises. Yes, he includes buckets of proposals for reform, but not all have anything to do with the Gospel and many are not exactly deep.

First, the good stuff. Weigel usefully focuses on the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII as beginning an era of reform in the Catholic Church, slowly shedding the accoutrements of the Catholicism we associate with the Counter-Reformation and adopting what Weigel perceives as a more evangelical Catholicism. I am not sure Leo would have used those terms, but many of the most significant achievements of Vatican II, such as the Decree on Religious Liberty and the commitment to social justice found in Gaudium et spes, have their beginnings in the writings of Leo. He was a great and seminal pope.

Second, Weigel rightfully seeks to move past the usual, and stale, left v. right framing of the post-Vatican II debates that have riled the Church in the U.S. and Western Europe. He is correct that the left has wanted more lax rules, and the right has wanted more strict rules, but that the whole point of Vatican II was to focus the Church on something deeper than the rules, namely, the encounter with the Risen Lord and subsequent friendship with Jesus, that is a fine definition of the Church. Kudos too for not being afraid to use the phrase ?friendship with Jesus? which may sound a little fundamentalist to RC ears but which is a lovely way of describing the relationship of the believer to the Lord.

Third, Weigel at times keeps the focus on Christ and almost lets himself sound like a Communio theologian. He writes:

The Christ proclaimed by Evangelical Catholicism is no mere moral paragon, no mere teacher of noble truths about righteous living who comes to a sad end because of human wickedness. He is the Son of the Most High God, incarnate in the flesh and in history, for, as C.S. Lewis provocatively suggested, there are only two other possibilities: that Jesus of Nazareth was a madman, or that he was history?s greatest liar. There are no other options.

I agree with every word of that and am not so proud as to deny that I wish I had written those lines.

Fourth, Weigel reminds the reader that Catholicism is a revealed faith, that there are limits to which we can recast the language, still less the doctrine, of the Church in our own image, even though he also admits that the Church needs to present its proposal of faith in language that the audience will comprehend. I think he tends to elide the real tensions between these two poles, always seeking an answer that is clear and courageous, as opposed to ?Catholic Lite,? and I agree we should avoid ?Catholic Lite,? although in this book, as in his career, Weigel is much better at detecting, and denouncing, those ?lite? Catholics whose politics differ from his own.

So, those are some of the strengths of this book. But, they could have been fit into an article, or a blog post. And, these pearls are found in a book that is disappointing at times, ridiculous at others, and often proposes an analysis of the actual history of the Church, or the reality of the Catholic Church in the 21st century, that fits a little too conveniently with his own already conceived ideas.

By way of example, Weigel suggests that Italian need not be the *lingua franca* of the curia. He thinks the curia should use English ?like every other international center of consequence.? Now, it would be fine by me if everyone in the curia spoke and wrote in English. But, I do not consider that if this were to happen it would be a ?deep? reform. Also, I have scoured the four Gospels, and I did not find any divine mandate for the use of modern English therein. It may be a good idea. It may be a bad idea. It is not an evangelical idea.

There are deeper problems with this book. One would expect that a book dedicated to the proposition that the Church must become more firmly rooted in the Gospel would actually begin its examination of the topics surveyed with some reference to Scripture. Alas, only one of Weigel?s twelve chapters begins with a quote from the Good Book and, throughout, he mostly uses Scripture as a source of proof texts for his ideas. He denounces those who see the Church in managerial terms, but then employs the language of management theory himself. He speaks of ?friendship with Christ,? but almost always employs the third person, producing a text that does not excite the heart. Many of the phrases sound like they were crafted as bumper stickers.

This lack of attention to the heart permeates the book. Weigel states that the two criteria for reform are ?truth? and ?mission.? He cites the Great Commission to go and make disciples throughout the book. But only a few times does Weigel mention the Great Commandment to love one another as He loved us. This leads Weigel to slur the staff of bishops? conferences, denouncing their bureaucratization as a problem rather than recognizing a certain amount of bureaucratization as a necessity in an increasingly interdependent and complex world. His constant holding up of Pope John Paul II as the very model of a modern major papacy at times lends itself into a kind of slur against Pope Paul VI. Weigel?s lack of attention to the mandate of charity also leads him to make an outrageously monstrous analogy, writing,

The Catholic Church was wheat and weeds when the Church bowed to royal absolutism; when some churchmen dallied, at least briefly, with fascism, when priests betrayed their vocations by cooperating with communist secret agencies; when postconciliar Catholic intellectuals took their cues from the cultured despisers of religion; when priests abused the young people entrusted to their care, and their bishops accepted the shibboleths of the therapeutic society in responding to such infidelity.

Hmmmm. Which one of those is not quite like the other: Royal absolutism. Fascism. Communism. Child Rape. Intellectual confusion. I think the last does not quite measure up, does it?

On pages 122-123, Weigel sets out his criteria for selecting new bishops. I actually agree with some of the items on the list, although the fact of making a list betrays a certain disposition of mind, putting people into boxes, that is more like the Myers-Briggs tests Weigel denounces than any human interactions found in the Scriptures. Nonetheless, some of his points are fine, such as the need for candidates to become bishops to ?manifest a deep personal conversion to friendship with Jesus? and the need for a candidate to ?regard the study of Scripture and theology as an essential part of his vocation.? But among the eight items listed, none mentions any demonstrated experience of living amongst the poor, or of loving them with Christ?s love. The poor figure very little in this tome. ?Nuf said.

I expected Weigel to repeat his understanding of the last half of the twentieth century, as he does. The fifties were a time of bliss. In the post-World War II years, ?Catholics experienced a relatively comfortable fit between the culture of the Church and the ambient public culture throughout the regions in which Christianity had long been established? he writes. ?Yet in less than a decade after the Council, the high culture of the West took a

sharp turn toward an aggressive and hegemonic secularism.? I would commend Brad Gregory?s book on the Reformation, and how it began the process of secularization, to Mr. Weigel. And, I invite him to think, deeply and evangelically, about the way prosperity and affluence in the post-World War II years might have contributed to the de-Christianization of the ambient public culture. He thinks our affluence may have obscured the emerging hostility of the culture to the Christian creed, but misses the ways that affluence advanced and facilitated that hostility.

The most difficult, if unsurprising, part of this book are those passages when Weigel gets on his highest of high horses and denounces those Catholics he thinks are insufficiently vigorous in seeing the world as he sees it. In his chapter on the reform of the episcopate, he writes:

The ?height? on which bishops stand is the truth of the Gospel as conveyed by Scripture and apostolic tradition, which a man solemnly affirms before his ordination to the episcopate. If a bishop does not stand on that height, if he imagines that ?faithful dissent? is a problem to be managed rather than a breach in the communion of the Church that must be challenged and corrected in charity, he cannot be a watchman for the New Israel, the Church. And he must be replaced.

This from the man who famously said the final papal encyclical from Benedict XVI should be read with gold and red pens, excising those passages that did not measure up to Weigel?s neo-conservative standards. This from the man who downplayed the call to a conversion of lifestyles among the affluent people of the West in many of John Paul?s writings and talks. This from the man who now condemns the depravity of Fr. Maciel but who was enabling Maciel as long as John Paul II was around protecting him, and who chastises the curia (darned bureaucrats!) for nominating an Archbishop of Warsaw who turned out to have collaborated with the communists, failing to note that the Congregation for Bishops (darned bureaucrats!) could be forgiven for not knowing what questions to ask of a Polish candidate because Weigel?s hero, John Paul II, made all Polish appointments on his own without consulting the Congregation for twenty-six years. Well, it is all a little much.

I agree with Weigel that the Church needs reform. I agree, too, that such reform must be grounded in the Gospel. But, I seem to recall the Master saying his good news was good news for the poor. I seem to remember the Blessed Mother warning the rich that they will be sent away empty when the reign of God commences. In the end, when Weigel writes that ?evangelical Catholicism requires X? or that ?evangelical Catholicism proposes Y? one has the suspicion that he has replaced a pronoun with the phrase ?evangelical Catholicism.? What Weigel is really saying is the he requires X, and he proposes Y. Fortunately, the 115 cardinal electors in the recent conclave took a wider view, a deeper view you might say, of the reforms they desire for the Church and selected a man who has lived among the poor and loved them and, just so, encountered Christ in a way that might actually commend itself to the admittedly somewhat tired Church in the West. Weigel wanted a culture warrior pope, and this book suggests a battle plan. But, instead, the cardinals chose, dare I say it, an evangelical Catholic. I hope Weigel can adjust.

Note to Readers: Today is the last of my three days away from my computer all day. Check out my colleague Jerry Filteau's reports on the Pacem in terris conference. Today, i am off to New York momentarily to give a talk on religious liberty and the media. Tomorrow, I will return to being a human being and providing links and short commentaries throughout the morning in addition to my larger morning post.

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