

Sins of the fathers

by [Susan K. Wood](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

*Papal Sins: Structures of Deceit*, by Garry Wills

Garry Wills identifies the foundational sin of the papacy not as pride, but as the deceit that cloaks sinful deeds in silence, denies error, or presents new theological justifications for no longer tenable positions. He inventories the "structures of deceit" that engender habits of skepticism or hypocrisy. The discrepancy between the private behaviors or beliefs of churchpeople and the Catholic Church's public teaching reinforce these structures of deceit. Will presents himself as a champion of honesty and truth in the tradition of St. Augustine, Cardinal Newman, Lord Acton and John XXIII.

Wills's book is a catalogue of all the predictable "hot topics" one sees in the press: Pius XII's apparent failure to strongly oppose Hitler's genocide in World War II, Paul VI's encyclical prohibiting the use of artificial contraception, the exclusion of women from the priesthood, the discipline of clergy celibacy, homosexual priests, pedophilia, abortion and Marian devotions. The sensational value is high. And there is truth in much of what Wills relates. Sins and infidelities have been committed by every rank of the church's ministers. Ironically, however, Wills himself engages in misleading scholarship by not telling the whole story, by a selective reading of sources and by errors of fact and logic.

In several chapters Wills makes his larger point by recounting a particular story in some detail. He has chapters on Edith Stein and Maximilian Kolbe (both canonized for their martyrdom in the Holocaust) and on Edgardo Mortara, the baptized Jewish boy taken from his family by Pius IX. Wills argues that Stein died in the Holocaust because she was Jewish rather than because she was Catholic. It's true that Stein died because she was of Jewish descent--she would not have died if she had been only Catholic. However, her death was associated with her Catholicism insofar as Catholics of Jewish descent were targeted by Hitler only after the protest of the bishop of Utrecht. Wills interprets the church's canonization of Stein as a usurpation of the Holocaust. Do we need to dispute ownership as if she were the baby in the Judgment of Solomon? I don't think so. Let us mourn the victims of the Holocaust

and be united in our common grief. On the other hand, the story about the baptized Jewish boy taken from his family and raised in the Vatican certainly strikes the contemporary reader as an appalling violation of fundamental family rights.

Wills's larger point, about the church's complicity in Hitler's atrocities and its underlying anti-Semitism, needs to be made on firmer historical grounds. Recent significant historical studies holding quite diverse interpretations of the period, such as those by Margherita Marchione, Pierre Blet, Rolf Hochhuth and John Cornwall, demonstrate how controverted an assessment of this period can be. The problem is Wills's lack of nuancing. The more specific question of the extent to which we should hold Pius XII accountable for the fate of the Jews of Rome and elsewhere demands a study of how the Vatican's foreign policy was determined by the concordat agreements with other nations and an assessment of that strategy. Wills does not incorporate the historical investigations that significantly contribute to the resolution of this question. In the mixture of sin and grace which is the human condition, the church has at times been anti-Semitic and at other times heroic in working to save Jewish lives.

Wills needs to cite what the church is doing today to resolve this issue. Despite the inadequacies of the Vatican document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" (March 16, 1998), the church does admit that the balance in Catholic-Jewish relations over 2,000 years has been "quite negative." In November 1999 the Holy See together with the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations commissioned a group of six scholars--three Catholic, three Jewish--to review the 12 volumes of archival documents of the Holy See already released for the World War II period.

While Wills's book was in press, on March 12, 2000, John Paul II presided at an historic service for a Day of Pardon. He asked forgiveness for the past and present faults of the children of the Catholic Church. Seven representatives of the Roman Curia acknowledged that "men of the Church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth." These included the use of "nonevangelical methods" in the service of faith; faults committed "against the people of the Covenant," Israel; sins committed against love, peace, the rights of peoples and the respect for other cultures and religions; sins that have wounded the dignity of women and the unity of mankind; and sins against the fundamental rights of human persons, including abuses against children, the poor and the unborn. This list substantiates many of the

charges that Wills makes. The current papacy cannot rewrite history, but it does call for a reformed Roman Catholic conscience.

Unfortunately, Wills's lack of theological expertise leads to a number of errors of fact. For example, Wills incorrectly cites Bernard Häring as noting that "the Catholic Catechism makes it a grave sin not to receive the Eucharist on holy days." What the Catechism in fact says, correctly cited by Häring, is that "the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation unless excused for a serious reason." Wills's larger point, the inaccessibility of the Eucharist because of a shortage of priests, stands, but it is made with faulty scholarship.

Elsewhere, he inaccurately assumes that a martyr cannot seek to avoid his or her death. In fact, a martyr does not have to choose death. He or she just has to choose not to deny faith in the face of that death. While Wills accurately cites the 1980 rule that women not to be allowed to act as altar servers (acolytes), he does not mention a subsequent change which allowed the U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy to permit this practice, although its implementation remains at the discretion of the diocesan bishop.

Wills says that "it might surprise Catholics to know that the sacrament of penance did not exist in Augustine's fourth century." This, too, is misleading, for Augustine did know a public canonical penance. A person guilty of serious sin confessed to a bishop or presbyter appointed to this office, enrolled in the order of penitents, did penance and was reconciled on Holy Thursday in a solemn ceremony just prior to the offertory. Augustine attests to the sacramental nature of the priest's reconciliation as well as the necessity of reconciliation for those who have sinned seriously after baptism in a passage that includes penance among the sacraments of the church. Private, auricular penance as we know it today did not develop until several centuries later.

Certainly, the silence and inadequate response of church authorities to reports of pedophilia on the part of clergy support Wills's thesis regarding structures of deceit. He assumes, however, that most pedophiles are homosexual persons without substantiating that fact with any data. This account too easily leads to the false conclusion that homosexual persons are pedophiles. There is no justification for inappropriate clerical behavior, and the church must confess its shortcomings in this regard, make restitution and change its policies to prevent both the criminal behavior and the self-serving silence.

Wills's account of this abuse is appropriately heartrending, but he fails to chronicle the positive steps the church is taking to redress this situation. Dioceses are writing and implementing policies on clergy misconduct. Saint John's Abbey and University created the Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute in 1994 to face directly the emerging information about sexual misconduct in ministry and to influence constructively the reshaping of leadership culture among religious traditions. It addresses systemic causes and pastoral issues of clergy sexual misconduct and promotes the prevention of sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment.

Wills's eucharistic theology as well as his theology of the priesthood is garbled. It is a mixture of the worst kind of fanciful folklore told to ridicule traditional teaching with a sprinkling of theological facts, and some very wrong conclusions. A reader is faced with the challenge of sorting out false popular belief from official church teaching and then assessing Wills's theological conclusions. This cannot be done by anyone not well versed in Roman Catholic theology. For example, the Catholic Church does not teach that the host can be desecrated "if handled by anyone but a priest." Lay extraordinary eucharistic ministers are common today, but you would not know it from reading Wills. Wills claims that "it is more the faithful who become the body and blood of Christ than bread and wine do." Does Roman Catholic theology teach that the community is transformed into the body of Christ at the Eucharist by the power of the Spirit? By all means. However, it also teaches that the bread and wine are transformed. It is not a question of one being more transformed than the other. Nor does the fact that the entire assembly is the subject of the liturgical action mean that the priest is simply the community's representative. Congregations are not the source of the authority of their priests, even if these were elected in early times. Mere election does not make a priest, but ordination does. Ordination invokes the Holy Spirit so that ministry is performed in the power of the Spirit.

The Catholic Church is often too slow to correct mistakes. For example, it was not until 1992 that John Paul II formally recognized the church's errors in the 17th-century Galileo case. Dissenters on certain issues like artificial contraception and the ordination of women do not receive ecclesiastical appointments. Synods of bishops are limited in what they can discuss. The title of Eamon Duffy's history of the papacy, *Saints and Sinners*, aptly summarizes the tale of political maneuvering by churchmen to achieve their sometimes misguided ends. This history lends some substance to Wills's claim about structures of deceit. Yet to tell tales of deceit is to tell only half the story, for the church has also known its saints and moments of

heroic self-sacrifice and service. The current papacy of John Paul II will go down in history as championing social justice.

A final nagging question remains about Wills's book. What are readers supposed to take away from it? Are they supposed to assume that the Catholic Church is hopelessly compromised by its past history? That it will carry on in the future as it has in the past? This would seem to be Wills's message, since he so often fails to give the church credit for trying to redress past wrongs or to give current information on the issues he raises. This book will fan the flames of anti-Catholicism and reinforce the prejudices of Catholics looking for yet another reason to support their disenchantment with the church. It is certainly not a book from which one can accurately learn the history and teaching of Roman Catholicism.