

Primacy of Popes and the Promise. A Review of O'Malley's "The History of the Popes"

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh posting is Steve Krueger's review of a book just out on the papacy. As you readers know from past postings coming from Steve, he has become our community's Augsburg Catholic "peritus" on the Roman Catholic church. [Peritus is the RC term for expert.] Here's more of the same.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Primacy of Popes and the Promise

A Review of THE HISTORY OF THE POPES by John W. O'Malley, S.J.

(Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010),

349 pages hardcover. \$26.95 U.S.

When Ed Schroeder enlisted Fr. Hans Küng's 2005 essay "Crisis in the Catholic Church: The Pope's Contradictions" (ThTh #359, April 28, 2005) for a perspective on the meaning of the death of John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI, completely absent from the assessment was an earlier optimism about the ecumenical possibilities Lutheran and Roman Catholic dialogue partners

believed they had seen related to the papacy. The common hopes had been published in "Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V" under the theme PAPAL PRIMACY AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH (ed. Paul Empie and T. Austin Murphy, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974).

In the Common Statement from Dialogue V, Lutherans had then been asking their fellows from the participating Lutheran churches if the time hadn't arrived for Lutherans "to affirm with us that papal primacy, renewed in the light of the gospel" be now seen more as a gift than a barrier to the reunification of the churches (pp. 22-23). Likewise, Roman Catholic participants asked their own tradition if Lutherans could not be afforded structures for self-governance which could co-exist with a renewed papal primacy to "respect their (the Lutherans') heritage" and "protect their legitimate traditions" (p. 23).

As Schroeder's ThTh #359 ("Reflections on the Roman Papacy") unpacked Küng's take on the situation as it stood in 2005, it was abundantly clear that whatever positive enthusiasm may have existed 31 years earlier about the papacy, it had absolutely vanished (in Küng's opinion, of course). What Schroeder particularly noticed about Küng's reading of where things stood post John Paul II was that the "renewed in the light of the gospel" part of the dialogue partners' hope about the papacy had really never materialized. According to Küng (ala Schroeder), that hope still lay on the horizon as it had in the 16th century when AC 28 was written with the exact same hope in mind. In Küng's words (cited by EHS): "New hope will only begin to take root when church officials in Rome and the episcopacy reorient themselves toward the compass of the Gospel."

The question for many of us is, "Why is it so hard and does it remain so elusive for the papacy to reclaim (assuming it was ever there to begin with) the compass of the Gospel with

seemingly so much at stake (including the reunification of churches who confess the 'satis est' of AC VII, that it is sufficient for the true unity of the church that it have achieved consensus on the gospel and the sacraments)?”

Of course, in answer, with a myriad of partisan ideologies aside, honest history can go a long way toward helping us better grasp why the papacy evolved quite the way it did. And to that end we are pleased to point to one new resource by Fr. John W. O'Malley, S.J. of Georgetown University whose A HISTORY OF THE POPES is a very readable and discussable mainstay toward a better understanding of “the oldest living institution in the Western world” (page x).

1. One Telling Clue: Papal History is the Story of Some Men
A HISTORY OF THE POPES (hereafter AHP) grew out of the author's thirty-six lectures recorded for Now You Know Media. Thus, from its inception, the book emerged from a highly communicative, conversational style which makes it successful to meet the author's goal to “make clear the basic story line in a way accessible to the general reader” (ix). Given the huge expanse of history which the narrative covers, to write about it well, as the author ably does, is no small feat. What makes AHP a stand-out resource is its reliable “leaner narrative” which provides “a recognizable path through complicated terrain,” able to satisfy the curiosity of the general reader and the more exacting needs of the scholar who may be seeking deeper meanings and conclusions (ix).

O'Malley's title is a tip-off at the outset to an important conclusion he makes about the papacy (which carries throughout its 2000 year history). The history of the papacy is the story of some 265 individuals besides Peter and Benedict XVI today. Thus, to O'Malley, “the history of the popes is not a history of Catholicism,

which is a much, much bigger reality" (xii). Nor is the history one of a monolithic institution about which many timeless conclusions can be drawn and often are. To tell the story accurately is to tell what happened to some men who happened to become through a variety of means the bishop of Rome.

To the author, one of the contemporary temptations is to over-inflate the importance of the papacy for understanding Catholicism (both for Catholics and non-Catholics). Here is where the historian can provide something of a corrective which, among other things, can help keep the significance of the papacy in perspective for something like intra-faith dialogues noted above. To that end, O'Malley reminds that in the year 1200, probably no more than two per cent of the population was even aware there was such a thing called a pope who may have claimed primacy over other bishops. "The papacy was not mentioned in any creed, and it did not appear in any catechism until the sixteenth century" (xii-xiii). As a matter of fact, O'Malley attributes the broadcasting of the papal institution to the Reformation and to the invention of the printing press. Only "with Protestant rejection" (of the papacy) and with it the countering of "Catholic preoccupation" that "to be Catholic was to define oneself a papist" (xiii).

Thus, it was men who comprised the papal history. Their job descriptions changed dramatically beyond being bishop of Rome; their strategies differed, too, depending on the shapes and influences of the world-wide political scene. Their relationships with secular authority evolved with history as well. Yet, it is liberating quietly to notice with the historian that, aside from the belief about the apostolic place of the one who was chosen to be the bishop

of Rome as Peter's successor, popes were many other things historically. Yet, none of these other things either implicitly or explicitly was ever meant to preempt the primacy of the Christic Promise around which the church has always ideally found its true unity and its purpose.

2. Four Defining Moments of Papal History"Four defining moments of papal history can serve as milestones in what sometimes seems like a zigzag course" (xiv).

AHP organizes its narrative around four events, each representing a monumental change for the individuals who would live out the meaning of those historic shifts. First is the foundational martyrdom of both Peter and Paul in Rome (circa 64) upon which all subsequent claims about the papacy are grounded. Second is the rise of Constantine as emperor and the emergence of an identifiable episcopacy in the socio-political life of the empire in the fourth century. Third is the coalescing of the Papal States in the eighth and ninth centuries creating papal temporal rulers (of sorts). Fourth is the break-up of the States in 1860-1870 as Rome became the secular capital of Italy in the Lateran agreement.

The last change is frequently associated with Ultramontanism, a growing movement of pro-papal power (ultramontane, "other side of the mountain" or Alps) which followed the breakup of the Gallican church (after the French Revolution) and which carries through (in the author's opinion) into contemporary Catholicism today. As Küng noted in 2005, John Paul II's church remained heavily influenced by Ultramontanism, despite the efforts of Vatican II for a more conciliatory authority of popes collaborating collegially with bishops. So, one of Fr. O'Malley's last lines would agree: "Catholics today live in an essentially Ultramontanist church" (329).

It is this historic key of how history has shaped today's papal office, as a papacy of Vatican I seeking to live in a post Vatican II world, that, among other things, may help unlock where ecumenical dialogues may yet fruitfully go, at least among those who find something of their identity in the Reformation era where papal issues were nuanced differently than they were at Vatican I and beyond. Again, where the issue can become the primacy of the Promise, there can be hopeful discussions yet to unfold. For Roman Catholics, however, it would mean moving beyond being "an essentially Ultramontanist church."

3. A Surprising Toughness Despite the ebb and flow of the papacy as it comes to us today, however, what is most remarkable of all is why we all still care about it as we do and why it persists as it does. Perhaps those are the two most compelling of all the questions the reader might bring to AHP. As a Missouri Synod Lutheran boy, there wasn't much good I remember hearing about pope or papacy from my tradition until I began learning that despite the pope being the Anti-Christ from our theological heritage, there had been a Council going on in the 1960s that had been saying some awfully interesting things enabled by a pope who you couldn't help but feel belonged to the world, even ours, and was beloved.

For some reason, therefore, for most, Catholics and non-Catholics alike (and those of us who see ourselves as fitting into both camps and call ourselves "Augsburg Catholics" and the like), it is not possible not to care about pope or papacy today. He and it persist, I suppose, because it is difficult to imagine a world or a church without "the oldest, still functioning institution in the Western world" (324). The papal institution has exhibited a surprising toughness.

The debate will continue about why the institution, one which Protestantism has tried to live without, persists anyway. Some Protestants have come to see its absence as a glaring weakness in their own many traditions. Some Catholics (e.g., Küng), argue just the opposite: that the papacy itself remains hopelessly out of touch and flawed, yet carefully guarding its power, so much so, that the Promising Gospel is the main casualty of an unregenerate papacy. Yet O'Malley's history would remind in conclusion, "The history of the papacy, let it be said again, is not the history of Catholicism" (325). We are asked, if we can, not to judge the faith by the one who would be seen as its human pastoral leader. That lesson is precisely what AHP would teach us already from the first legend of Peter running away from Rome until he met the Lord and asked, "Quo vadis, Domine?" ("Where are you going, Lord?").

That question about the institution called the papacy persists most of all and its current issues are well presented by John O'Malley's A HISTORY OF THE POPES. It's an excellent addition to any serious theological library but it's also an approachable story for the general reader which most everyone will find as a good and compelling introduction to these important men of Christian history.

Of the papacy, all of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, seemingly keep asking, "Quo vadis, Domine?" Hopefully, the future will answer with Küng's concern first and foremost about reorienting all things involving the papacy to the "compass of the Gospel."

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