

BOOK REVIEW

Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church. By George Weigel. New York: Basic Books, 2013. 291 pp. \$ 27.99. ISBN 978-0-465-02768-2.

George Weigel's book *Evangelical Catholicism*, outlining the way forward for the Church in the 21st century, hit the shelves at a very appropriate time, when quite unexpectedly Benedict XVI resigned in the middle of the Year of Faith. In one sense, it can be read as a recipe book for reform written for episcopal bedside tables. Still, advice on how to act must, if credible, rest on an accurate analysis of the present condition and its historical genesis. Different understandings of how things Catholic stand and what the strengths and flaws of modern societies and cultures are, inevitably lead to different reform programs. Weigel's main thesis is that the Catholic Church in the 21st century needs to embrace decidedly and to develop further the form of Catholic self-understanding that began with Leo XIII in 1878. Weigel portrays this "Evangelical Catholicism" as a new dispensation, replacing "Counter-Reformation Catholicism," which in its turn took over the baton from "Medieval Catholicism." The evangelical approach can be seen, for example, in the development of the social teaching of the Church, which having been initiated by Leo XIII, gradually came to terms with democracy and religious freedom. The move was from a rejection of modernity (Pius IX) to an engagement with it (Leo XIII), implying that the positive sides of modernity are acknowledged, or at least that some aspects of modernity are allowed to influence genuine developments of the Catholic Church. The Counter-Reformation model as described by Weigel was "catechetical-devotional" and relied on a close relation between church and state. In this milieu, Catholic life was transmitted within a culture attuned to its fundamental values. With increasing secularization and huge social transformations such as industrialization this model was thought to be no longer feasible. The process of engagement with modernity reached its apogee in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), but the next phase of modernity followed quite quickly in the late 1960s, that is, post or late modernity, which is described by Weigel (16), and others, as leading to the destruction of Catholic micro-cultures, or subcultures. If the Catholic Church in the period 1878 to 1968 moved toward engagement with modernity, then the post-1968 church has suffered the full impact of late modernity characterized by skepticism, relativism and consumerism. Weigel argues that the Catholic Church needs to meet this challenge, not by retreating into some new form of catacombs, but by becoming intensely evangelical, which according to him does not mean Protestant, which needless to say is what

most persons at first glance would presumably think is his intention. Nevertheless, his reform program has some affinities with Protestantism in that the central focus is on the personal relation with Jesus, which sustains the individual's growth in holiness by the development of the virtues. Weigel's reform is thus fundamentally personalist, but his book does not focus on personal experiences and forms of mysticism. The emphasis is more on the outward missionary zeal of the individual and the church. It is the civic aspects of Catholic life that interest Weigel the most.

The second similarity with Protestantism is precisely his strong focus on mission and the personal witness of all Catholics, not merely of priests and those in consecrated life. Of the ten characteristics of "Evangelical Catholicism" enumerated, friendship with Lord Jesus Christ is number one. The following eight characteristics anchor it in a particular Catholic self-understanding, including: in a hierarchical church, with a clear teaching authority, and relying on the seven sacraments. The tenth principle is, fittingly, mission.

What complicates the natural appeal that the basic vision of the book should have for most Catholics is that harmony with the teaching authority of the Church is not something that comes aplenty in the 21st century. The book, therefore, opens with the rhetorical figure of the golden mean. On the left we find the progressives (Catholicism *presentis*), and on the right we find the traditionalists (antiquarian Catholicism). The way forward must, according to Weigel, leave this dualism behind and opt for an evangelical Catholicism that puts emphasis both on continuity (tradition) and development. He thus envisions a third way between the extremes, or the synthesis that overcomes the thesis and antithesis of reactions to foremost the Second Vatican Council. In that sense, he stands squarely within the hermeneutics of continuity powerfully championed by Benedict XVI.

The problem is that this schema of overcoming dualism is too simple and relies on positing two extreme ideal type alternatives. For of course almost everyone wants true reform and everyone recognizes that this requires reaching back or retaining something of what went before. The tricky question is instead where to draw the line more precisely between what to keep and what to discharge. Which principles should be used for delineating the border between substance and accident? A change of essence is tantamount to substantial change, and thus, loss of identity. The notion of a Christian essence manifesting itself as a historically realized potentiality already present in the Deposit of Faith, moreover, adds further complexity to the issue. I think the trope of overcoming a dualism of erroneous extremes is unnecessary for the main core of Weigel's reform program, and contrary to his stated intentions; it actually reinforces the dualism. Instead of applauding his acknowledgement of positive elements in traditionalism and progressivism, which are integrated into the evangelical third way, reviewers

of both camps, not unsurprisingly, find pleasure in chastising him and his book, as some googling quickly shows. For example, he becomes in the eyes of the left and the right, Weigel the neo-conservative or the insufferable Mr. Weigel. To argue for a golden mean in the face of a real power struggle reminds me of a conversation from my teenage years in Sweden in the 1980s with a member of the youth organization of the Social Democratic party, who said that the US and Soviet Union were both very bad, but the US was slightly worse. This discourse of two almost equally bad alternatives was of course the legitimation for the third way of Swedish neutrality, which post-1989 was shown not to have been neutral at all.

As I see it, the main flaw of Weigel's book is precisely that his heavy emphasis on action and on concrete reforms gives the analysis of history and the contemporary situation little space to develop in a nuanced approach. Although I mostly find myself agreeing with him in principle, the book tends toward an oversimplified account of how things are and were.

For example, the analysis of modernity, late modernity and modernism needs further development. The start of a new era under Leo XIII which leaves a hard anti-modernity stance behind is somewhat complicated by Pius X who ordered the anti-modernist oath, which was abolished only in 1967. Other lacunae include his brief treatment of Globalization as well as the development of new information technology and the challenges that it constitutes.

Finally, I find Weigel's metaphor (102) of continuity as the gathering up of fragments from the whole of Christian history to build the mosaic of evangelical Catholicism an apt one for a self-conscious Catholic of today. It is almost as if the chain of tradition is broken, and all we have are fragments which we try to piece together in our individual lives in order to achieve at least some measure of wholeness. This is of course in a nutshell the postmodern condition. But if all we have are bits and pieces, the question is whether Weigel's strong focus on missionary action is more than slightly overoptimistic. Is this not a time to consider well also the value of contemplation and adoration? Is a withdrawal to a new form of micro-culture really a non-adaptive strategy? Perhaps there is a bursting point, when the distance between the values of late modern society, which he describes as neo-gnostic, and that of the Catholic Church becomes so great that the countercultural aspects of evangelical Catholicism endorsed by Weigel evolve into an alternative culture which is missionary more by example than political influence.

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