

## Review of *The Road from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism*

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In art, perspective is crucial; otherwise, you make some things more important than they should be and, consequently, overlook items of significance. It's like a child's drawing with the head three times as large as the torso and the ears so small you can barely see them. Perspective, though, is necessary in any endeavor to find the truth. In his two-volume work [\*The Road from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism: Rethinking the Papacy in a Time of Ecclesial Disintegration\*](#), Dr. Peter A. Kwasniewski shows that we have lost our perspective on the papacy, inflating its authority and, as a result, neglecting its shortcomings. In the [first volume](#), he puts the papacy in its doctrinal and historical perspective (revealing the "hyperpapalism" of today), and then, in [Volume II](#), he documents the failings of Pope Francis's pontificate (exacerbated and obscured by this "hyperpapalism").

I am not a theologian or Church historian. (And one thing I appreciated about this work is that a layman can easily understand the arguments.) Like many Catholics raised after Vatican II, though, I have struggled to reconcile the Faith taught by my parents and lived in the lives of the Saints with the doings of the last 60 years. To solve any problem, you need to know not only *what* went wrong, but also *how* it went wrong. We've had many answers to the "what" of our current mess — Freemasonry, Modernism, moral and financial corruption, etc. Dr. Kwasniewski gives a much-needed answer to the "how."

### Answering the "How" of Our Current Mess

He starts Volume I, subtitled *Theological Reflections on the Rock of the Church*, with a piece entitled "My Own Journey from Hyperpapalism to Catholicism." It is one of my favorite pieces because it echoed my own odyssey. Simply put, we Catholics had come to view the Pope as not so much the deputy of Christ as almost His replacement. Perhaps this was understandable in the wake of Protestantism when the papacy served as a rallying cry for Catholics. We fell on hard times with the diffidence of Paul VI's pontificate, but thought we had the answer in the vigorous and charismatic John Paul II. In his defense of life, his stance against communism, and with encyclicals such as *Veritatis Splendor*, we thought, "This is it! Just follow the pope and you can't go wrong." With the temperance of Benedict XVI, it seemed as though things might straighten out. We thought all we needed was the "right" pope because the pope was always "right."

This is hyperpapalism. It confuses infallibility with inerrancy and inculpability. While the office of the Pope is central to Catholicism, the man isn't. With the election of Francis, we were caught in our own web. We now had a Church and a pope infected with hyperpapalism. This, combined with Francis's heterodoxy and loquacity, has led to our "perfect storm."

Dr. Kwasniewski pulls us back. He quotes Benedict XVI: "[The pope] must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the Church to obedience to God's word, in the face of every attempt to adapt it or water it down, and every form of opportunism." Apparently, Francis didn't get the memo. And somewhere along the line, we didn't either. We didn't realize, after coming up from the water, that the Pope can be wrong; that he can, in Dr. Kwasniewski's words, "blow it big time just like the rest of us."

For generations raised on the rhetorical question, "Are you more Catholic than the Pope?", this was problematic. The answer is not sedevacantism, conciliarism, or Eastern-rite patriarchies, much less Protestantism, but in recovering the traditional understanding of the Pope as the *Vicar* of Christ (a title, incidentally, scuttled by Pope Francis). The Pope should safeguard the fabric of the Faith, neither allowing it to unravel nor weaving it to his own liking. If he does either? Dr. Kwasniewski quotes Doctor of the Church St. Robert Bellarmine: "It is lawful, I say, to resist him, by not doing what he commands, and hindering him in the execution of his will." This is where we are now.

## Perspective, Hope, and Warnings

In subsequent chapters of Volume I, Dr. Kwasniewski gives perspective, hope, and warnings. The perspective comes particularly from Chapter 2 (Lessons from History: A Brief Review of Papal Lapses), Chapter 5 (The Church Never Fails — but Churchmen are Another Story), Chapter 9 (Does Pius VI's *Auctorem Fidei* Support Paul VI's *Novus Ordo*?), Chapter 11 (Selective Papal Adulation), and Chapter 13 (Are the "Inopportunist" of the First Vatican Council Being Vindicated?). These show us how the Church has traditionally understood the papacy. The piece on the "Inopportunist" was especially helpful because it shows that the *doctrine* of papal infallibility was not so much an issue to many at Vatican I as the *timing* of it was. With infallibility, the "Inopportunist" were worried that some would confuse *anything* the Pope says with "the Magisterium." And in today's 24/7 Twitter world, with the Nancy Peolsis and Fr. Martins dribbling "but the Pope says," their point has been vindicated.

There is hope in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 (The State of the Church and the State of Our Souls; Keeping to the Arduous Paths and Leaving Satan Behind; Trials in the Church: Blessings in Disguise), and Chapters 18 and 19 (Our Spiritual Response to Scandals and Abuses; Why

Remain Catholic, in Spite of Everything). These make for good spiritual reading, illuminating our minds and nourishing our souls. Dr. Kwasniewski says that we should, in a way, feel privileged that God has placed us at this moment in history. It shows His trust in us. The author's advice: hold to the timeless truths of the Faith found in reliable catechisms such as that of the Council of Trent; read the writings of the Saints; pray in the manner of the Saints, with fasting, traditional liturgy (more on that later), *lectio divina*, etc. The bottom line is, the Truth isn't going anywhere, so stay where the Truth always has been and ever shall be.

There are warnings in Volume I, mostly dealing with Pope Francis, but as these coincide with Volume II, subtitled *Chronological Responses to an Unfolding Pontificate*, I shall treat them now with that volume.

Dr. Kwasniewski documents many instances where Francis has misstated or contradicted the teachings of the Church as well as overstepped the bounds of the papacy. The chapters are a rough ride, like a game of papal bumper-cars.

Doctrinally, Francis has lapsed on (mainly) three issues: (1) the death penalty (his attempt to change its moral status), (2) reception of the Eucharist by divorced and civilly "re-married" Catholics, and (3) syncretism (rooted in religious indifferentism). There are about six pieces in which Dr. Kwasniewski deals explicitly and deftly with the death penalty issue. He documents the perennial teaching of the Church, i.e., that the death penalty is morally acceptable. He then shows that Pope Francis's alteration to say that the death penalty is now "inadmissible" not only goes beyond what Pope John Paul II said, but flatly contradicts the teaching of the Church.

This may be — *may be* — the most damaging of Francis's doctrinal "developments", precisely because it leaves its mark on a Catechism that was meant to be *the* Catechism for modern times. As the title of Chapter 40 says: "What Good is a Changing Catechism? Revisiting the Purpose and Limits of a Book." It is usually liberals who complain that the Church is "just a set of rules." This would seem to show it; for "rules" — as opposed to Truth — can be changed willy-nilly to suit the purposes of the ruling body. The title of another chapter exposes an inevitable result: "Medical Journal: If Pope Francis Can Change Doctrine on Death Penalty, Why Not Abortion?" The message seems to be: whatever your disagreement with the Catholic Church, don't worry, we'll come around to you. (Unless, of course, you want the Latin Mass.)

The pieces on the Synods on the Family (2014-2015), including their fruit (*Amoris Laetitia*), and the Youth Synod (2018) show how Pope Francis has tried to change (and will slide into changing more) the Church's doctrine on marriage and sexuality. Under Francis, the Church

now “accommodates” (another favorite word in the Bergoglian lexicon) the view of the modern world. Dr. Kwasniewski cites Josef Pieper: whoever controls language controls reality. When we don’t say what ought to be said (e.g., “Marriage is for life”), when we ask impossible questions (e.g., “Can there be such a thing as homosexual marriage?”), and when we forsake traditional language in favor of neologisms (e.g., LGBTQ+), we abuse and will ultimately destroy the teachings of the Church.

And then we have Pope Francis’s syncretism in the “Document on Human Fraternity” signed in Abu Dhabi (2019) and the Amazon Synod (2019). Regarding the Abu Dhabi declaration, one irony about this pope is that he seems willing to tout and trust every religious tradition but his own. As for the latter, Chapter 48 (“A Theological Review of the Amazon Synod”) shows it was marred by a naked display of idolatry in the Vatican Gardens and under the Pope’s direct supervision (Oct. 4, 2019). (Interestingly, reports about a certain novel coronavirus began appearing roughly three months later.)

## Governance and Liturgy

There are several pieces on Pope Francis’s governance of the Church, best summed up by the title of Chapter 60: [“Is the Pope the Vicar of Christ or CEO of Vatican, Inc.?”](#) Pope Francis has made hyperpapalism his *modus operandi*. He has blurred — or erased — the lines of the different states of life in the Church as well as attenuated their proper function, especially regarding the episcopacy. The fault isn’t entirely the Pope’s; as Dr. Kwasniewski indicates, the bishops seem willing to be treated as department heads rather than bishops in their own right. This shows another sad effect of hyperpapalism: bishops failing to act as true shepherds because they are looking over their shoulder at papa. (As I write this, Pope Francis has issued another directive bypassing the bishops and requiring all public associations of the faithful to have Vatican approval.) The Pope who wants us to trust so many things — the “God of surprises,” the “spirit of the times,” evolution, other religions and cultures — seems, in the end, to trust no one but himself in governing the Church.

Throughout these essays is a theme Dr. Kwasniewski, known principally for his work on the liturgy, weaves in with a strong thread. All of the various aberrations — doctrinal, moral, administrative — have their nexus in the liturgy. The *lex orandi* is the *lex credendi* is the *lex vivendi*. Think of it this way: What is the one question just about any Catholic these days asks about Mass (if he cares to ask any)? Answer: “What priest did you have?” While that question is inconsequential for those who attend the traditional Roman liturgy (aside from the sermon and priestly chanting), it can be make-or-break for *Novus Ordo* attendees. If we view the personality of the priest, rather than his office, as central to our worship, it warps our view of the Faith.

## Hard (But True) Sayings

Two things troubled me about Volume II, neither of which are Dr. Kwasniewski's fault. The first is that the pieces are arranged chronologically according to their original publication dates, so it is never just one issue in front of the reader. Under one pope, in just nine years, there has been such a series of developments, shifts, and changes that, before you catch your breath on one, another comes along. Because of this, they're soon forgotten. It's as though we're playing "whack-a-mole" with a poltergeist.

Also, Dr. Kwasniewski at times describes Pope Francis and his actions in severe terms. For example, regarding the pope and the death penalty, Dr. Kwasniewski says, "Pope Francis has shown himself to be openly heretical" and that this action "is a sign of a dangerous megalomania — the evidence of a pope disconnected from his office and from reality." In the piece on the Pope's 2019 Christmas address in which Francis does an Orwellian jiu-jitsu on the traditional understanding of continuity, claiming that continuity comes about only by changing everything, Dr. Kwasniewski asks: "Could anyone need more evidence that the Church is being ruled by someone who is barely, or not at all, Catholic?" Another chapter concerning Archbishop Viganò's testimony "unmask[s] Pope Francis more and more as a facilitator of that lavender mafia in whose limp-wristed bureaucratic grip the Church on earth is suffering strangulation." It hurts to hear these remarks.

And yet, as I re-read these essays, I found myself asking, "Well, what *can* you say?" Here's the problem. At the beginning of his pontificate, when Francis would make a seeming *faux pas*, it was dismissed as being "quoted out of context" or spoken "off the cuff" (imprecisely). But we've had nine years of official pronouncements, papal appointments, apostolic exhortations, printed homilies, a "change" to the *Catechism*, all going in the same direction. There are no explanations anymore; respectful requests from bishops and cardinals for clarifications are ignored; attempts at investigation are shot down; we're just supposed to go along.

On the "change" to the *Catechism*, the *only* authority Pope Francis cited was a previous address by *himself*. When a man dares to defy 2,000 years of Church teaching and says, in effect, "I am right, and I am right because *I* said so," what do you call it? As to the charge of heresy, the evidence is thoroughly catalogued and clearly summarized in the 2019 [Open Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church](#), to which Dr. Kwasniewski is a signatory.

The Lavender Mafia is the "elephant in the room." Francis only elevates prelates who support the LGBTQ+ agenda (e.g., Cupich, Farrell, Tobin, McElroy, Gregory). He has overseen the gutting of the John Paul II Institute on the Family and the Pontifical Academy for Life. He quashed the U.S. bishops' investigation into the clerical abuse scandal. He has

courted and celebrated the likes of Fr. James Martin. This evil certainly predates Francis, but it is one thing to be hoodwinked or gun-shy and quite another to promote it openly.

Dr. Kwasniewski shows himself a man sober and precise in his use of words and thorough in his documentation. In each of the instances above, he proves that there really is no escaping the conclusion to be drawn. In agreement with Dr. Kwasniewski, I have to say that to evade these harsh words is a “psychological coping mechanism for not dealing with the now notorious fact that we have a pope who is somewhat like a truck with failed brakes careening out of control down a steep mountain and heading for a mighty crash.” As he says elsewhere, “It is not only not uncharitable to name names; it is uncharitable not to name names.”

## Where Things Stand

The final chapter of Volume II, “Pius X to Francis: From Modernism Expelled to Modernism Enthroned,” shows where we are now. Dr. Kwasniewski connects the dots from the “Black Modernists” of 120 years ago who embraced rationalism, to the naive “Scarlet Modernists” of 60 years ago, to the morally deviant “Lavender Modernists” of today. It is grim reading, but it ends with counsel and hope: “This is what we are asked to do: remain faithful to the inheritance we have received, prior to the period of anarchy.” If there is so much wreckage, that may be because the storm has spent its force.

In 50 or 100 years, when future generations reflect on these times, they will recognize that a major cause of the carnage was that for too long the papacy had been viewed with inverted bifocals — embellishing the person while overlooking his faults. They will see that hyperpapalism obscured the true nature of the papacy and the limits of the man who sits on the Chair of St. Peter.

Hyperpapalism has done significant damage, it is true, but through his writings Dr. Kwasniewski has given us a roadmap back to authentic Catholicism. He helps us regain a proper perspective, and for that, we owe much thanks.

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