

April Book Summary

By Dan Brent

A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church - Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop

Rembert G. Weakland, OSB, Eerdmans Publishing, 2009, 429 pp., \$35

Weakland is now the retired archbishop of Milwaukee. In his twenty-five years as archbishop there (1977-2002), he was recognized as one of the wisest and most liberal bishops in the country.

He immediately begins this autobiography by surfacing the controversy in his life: the archdiocese paid money to settle a suit from a homosexual incident with a thirty year old man. The incident occurred shortly after Weakland's arrival in Milwaukee but surfaced only at the end of his time as archbishop.

Weakland was born in 1927 in a small (and poor) community in western Pennsylvania. After his father died, they became a welfare family. He attended Catholic school and learned to play the piano. He was a bright student and arrangements were made for him to attend the Benedictine high school and eventually their minor seminary in Latrobe. He was ordained in 1951 after studying theology in Rome.

His Benedictine abbey, St. Vincent's in Latrobe, sent him to New York for graduate work in music at Juilliard and Columbia.

In 1963, to his astonishment, the monks of St. Vincent elected him as abbot. He tells of waiting outside their meeting, as each nominated monk was required to do while the other monks discussed their potential. "When called back in, I sat down next to the monk who had entered the monastery with me. 'Get ready, Rem,' he said. 'You're it.'" (p. 102)

A fire had destroyed a large portion of the monastery earlier in 1963 and much of his work as abbot was given to planning and rebuilding it along with facilities to accommodate its expanding college program. He also supervised the incorporation of the Benedictine brothers into the general community. They had previously lived and prayed separately from the priests. Weakland also successfully politicked Rome to allow their office to be prayed in English rather than Latin – so the brothers could understand the psalms and readings.

In 1967 – he was only forty years old – Weakland was chosen in Rome by his fellow abbots as their "abbot primate", the international head of the Benedictines. His life changed dramatically. He was required to live in Rome. His energy went to two priorities. He spent much time dealing with the Roman curia with a focus on defending the independence of the worldwide Benedictine communities. When he felt he was losing a point with the cardinals of the curia, he learned to go directly to Pope Paul VI. The pope always received him cordially – and always gave him what he sought. Word spread in the

curia that, if Rembert wanted something, you might as well give it to him or the pope would!

His other priority was traveling to visit and encourage the global network of Benedictine men and women. Weakland happened to be in Thailand when Thomas Merton had his fatal accident and it was Weakland who anointed him and celebrated and preached the funeral mass. In his ten tears as abbot primate, Weakland made a total of 598 visits to Benedictine monasteries around the world!

His life as abbot primate proved to be a lonesome one for Weakland. “Traveling so much from community to community and visiting many different cultures with the barriers they raised to personal communications and lasting friendships demanded their own human price.” (p. 197)

The author periodically reflects on the tone and politics in the Vatican during his years in Rome. Paul VI had been pope for the last three years of Vatican II. Weakland felt that, in the post-council years, Paul attempted to balance the reach of the still conservative curia with the more progressive initiatives of the council. He usually pleased neither side. Weakland was distressed with the outlook the curia displayed toward the United States. The attitude seemed to be, “The new and more lay-dominated Church rising in the United States had to be controlled and kept within clear boundaries.” (p. 213)

In 1977, Paul VI asked Weakland to accept the job as archbishop of Milwaukee. Weakland took his reservations to his confessor. “My director responded that not aspiring to be a bishop was probably the best criterion for becoming one.” (p. 225)

Weakland’s outgoing personality, his preference for collegial style, and often his training in music led to his inclusion in many committees for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. He describes in some detail his involvement in creating the 1986 bishops’ document “Economic Justice for All”. He was particularly pleased with the process of consultation with all the American bishops that went into its development. It went through three drafts on its path to approval.

Collegiality also characterized his leadership in Milwaukee. He established an archdiocesan pastoral council and encouraged parish councils. He expresses his pride in the archdiocesan synod (of clergy and laity) that identified priorities for the archdiocese in 1987. He believed that “No single group – hierarchy, religious, or laity – has a monopoly on the Spirit’s gifts.” (p.252)

Weakland shares in some detail his pain in dealing with the priests’ sexual scandal. Initially he dealt with it poorly, following the inadequate counsel of psychologists who prescribed counseling, closer supervision, and careful reassignment of priest pedophiles. He came to realize that it was the victims who needed the primary focus of the church’s attention.

After the election of John Paul II as pope in 1977, Weakland's relationship with Rome deteriorated rapidly. John Paul was always cool to him; he no longer had a patron to protect him from the cardinals in the curia. During the regular "ad limina" accountability visits to the Vatican, he would be summoned by several cardinals to be scolded for things like allowing girls to serve mass. Mostly the curia distrusted his "attitude", especially his openness about the role of women in the church – ordination to the priesthood included.

At home, his project to repair and renovate the archdiocesan cathedral precipitated a great deal of protest from the more conservative Catholics of the archdiocese.

In 2002, having reached the mandatory retirement age of 75, he resigned. "Looking back on my life, I realize I have often had a front seat in that history, even at times playing a minor role as a minor actor." (p.418)