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## WHY PRIESTS?: A Failed Tradition By Garry Wills

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## WHY PRIESTS?: A Failed Tradition.

By Garry Wills. <sup>Helmke: WHY PRIESTS?</sup> New York: Penguin Books, 2013. 320 pages. Hardcover. \$27.95.

Early in 2013, Garry Wills, Pulitzer Prize winner and writer of *What Jesus Meant* and *Papal Sin*, published *Why Priests?* This is his latest book and attack on the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church. Though he had five years of training for the priesthood by Jesuits, Wills writes as a lay person. His book has aroused interest among Lutheran pastors of our neighboring Chicagoland communities.

Some of us felt, “So what’s new? Wills sounds like a good Lutheran.” What is new is the fact that Wills is not Lutheran. He is a practicing and devout Roman Catholic, a friend of priests attacking the priesthood of his own church. In his “Address to the Nobility of the German Nation” of 1520 Martin Luther sounded the death knell for the priesthood of his reformation movement. He claimed with the apostle Peter (1 Pt 2:5, 9) that all the saints in heaven and on earth, not just the clergy, are called to be a royal priesthood.

Wills points out Jesus never calls himself a priest in the Gospels and throughout years of persecution the early Christian church survived and even prospered quite well without priests. He focuses his attention upon the writing that he claims should be titled *To Hebrews*, not *To the Hebrews*. He asserts that Hebrews is the only writing in the New Testament where Jesus is called a priest and his suffering and death is portrayed as his sacrifice in ransom for sin.

According to Wills, Hebrews should not have been accepted into the New Testament canon. In the Western church its acceptance came late, close in time to the recognition of Christianity by the emperor Theodosius as the religion of the empire (AD 380).

Wills's second point in the development of the priesthood as a powerful political office is the development of the doctrine of transubstantiation. In time only the priest could "put God in your mouth." Wills believes the role of the sacrament in the early church was primarily to promote fellowship with Christ and other Christians and this was confirmed by St. Augustine (AD 354–430). The medieval church, ignoring Augustine, reinterpreted the sacrament based upon the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225–1274) who lived more than eight centuries after Augustine. Aquinas treated the sacrament as a re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ enacted by the priest with the bread and wine changed into the body and blood of Christ by words of consecration that could only be spoken by the priest.

There is much I did not like in *Why Priests?* including something as apparently insignificant as Wills's use of the word "pact" for "covenant." This I found demeaning to the mystery of God's unilateral covenant of grace for mankind. His interpretation of the "Last Suppers"[sic] of Christ might appear more amenable to Reformed theology than to the Lutheran theology of the sacrament defined by Martin Luther in his *Small Catechism*. Few if any Muslim readers would find fault with Wills's final statement ". . . let me say simply this: *There [sic] is one God and Jesus is one of his prophets* and I am one of his followers" (259, emphasis mine). There appears to be little of exegetical value in Wills's translation of Hebrews. It reflects the theological bias he revealed in his book. Most serious for me is Wills's assertion that atonement as ransom and Christ's death as sacrifice appear only in Hebrews. One might wonder how carefully Wills reads the New Testament especially the Gospel of Matthew (e.g., 20:28), Mark (e.g., 10:45), and Revelation (passim).

In conclusion, I am happy to keep Wills's book in my library. He presents us with a clear but brief introduction to Saints Augustine, Anselm, Abelard, and Thomas Aquinas. Though he does not include a bibliography, the breadth of his reading and frequent quotation of respected authors is impressive. Short chapters and Wills's crisp writing style make for enjoyable, thought-provoking reading.

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